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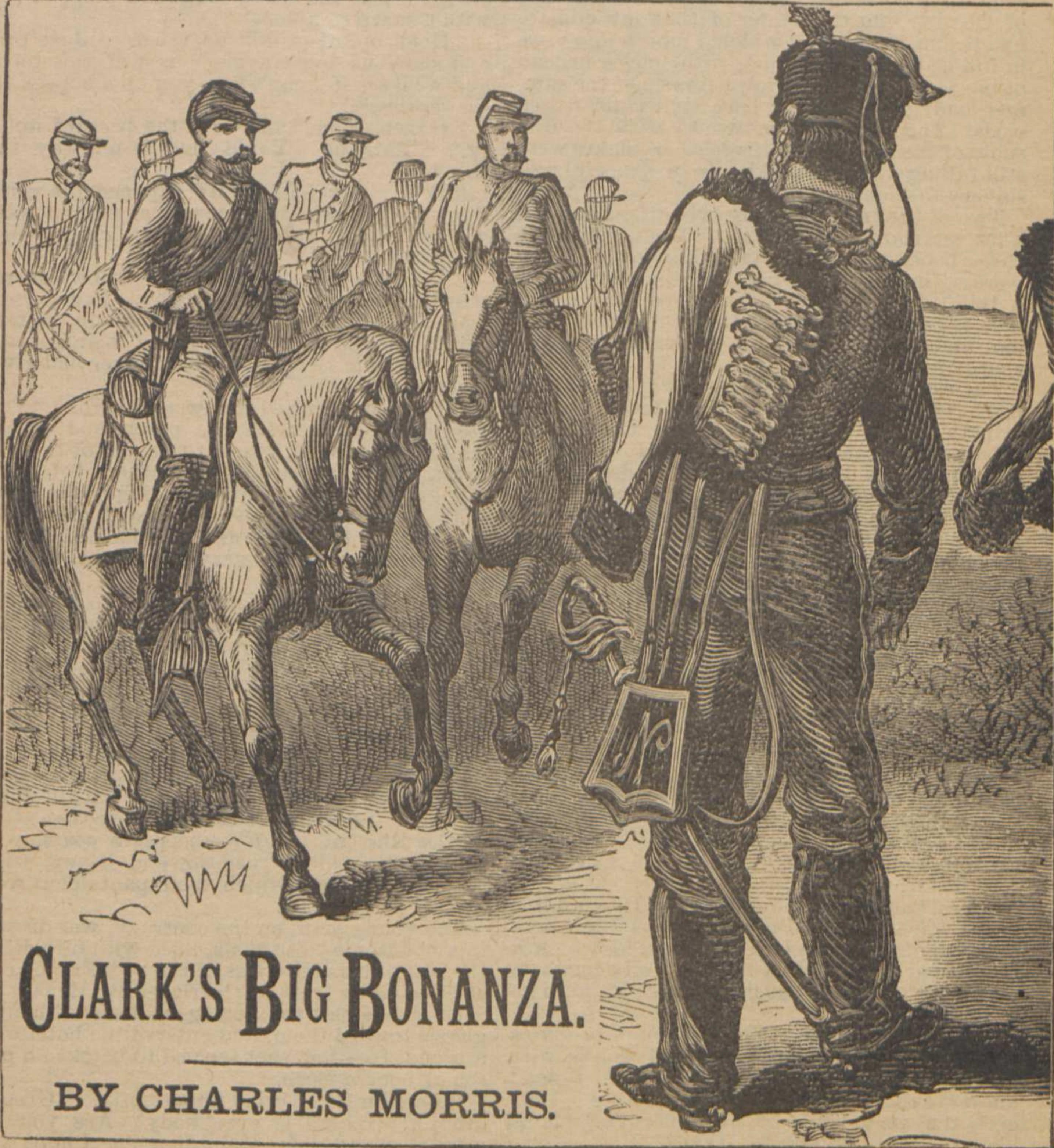
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CLARK'S BIG BONANZA.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

Clark's Big Bonanza;

OR,

A HOT TRAIL.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "HONEST HARRY," "THE YOUNG
NIHILIST," "THE DESERT ROVER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE HEART OF SIBERIA.

INTO the heart of a town in South Siberia rode three horsemen. It was early in the month of October, but the winter of that icy climate had begun. The trees, which a month ago were in full leaf, were now hung with icicles instead of blossoms, and the yellow harvests of the summer had given way to bare stalks and frozen clods. The road-bed was white with the first snow of the season, and the feathery flakes were still falling from the skies in a graceful yet shivery fashion.

Two of the travelers were evidently Russians. That was shown by their spare faces, their high cheek-bones, and small, twinkling eyes. They were both shrewd-looking men; the one of them a tall, thin fellow, with brick-red hair, and a face as grave as a statue; the other with light hair and blue eyes, and an expression of great energy and decision.

Their companion was little more than a boy, but he had a man's look on a boy's face. A slight growth of hair on his upper lip was the first promise of a coming mustache. He was tall, and gracefully built, while his handsome face seemed to overflow with youthful spirit, and with a daring that would stop at no obstacle. As for his nationality, that was not easy to make out. He was dressed in full Russian costume, and much more expensively than the common attire of his companions. His complexion and features were also like the Russian, yet there was something about him of a foreign air. He looked like one who had been used to do as he pleased all his life, and had not been accustomed to the slavery of the Russian government.

"So this is Trobilk," he remarked in good Russian, though with a foreign accent. "There isn't much of it to swear by, that's one thing sure. Bless my eyes, what a shivery place it must be when it gets cold enough to freeze the skin off a goat's horns! You've been here before, Peter, you say?"

"Yes," answered the red-haired Russian in a grave voice. "And I'm afraid I've been here once too often." He looked around him with a frightened aspect. "It may be well enough to play with the bees; but it isn't wise to jump into their hive."

"Dang that, Peter. You're enough to give a baboon the blues," answered the youth with cheery recklessness. "Do you think I don't know we're in danger? What of that? Danger's the very spice of life for roving blarney like us. What do you say, Ivan?"

"I don't scare easily," answered the second Russian. "At the same time I think Peter is right. There is no use to plunge into a hornet's nest, when you can fly around it."

"Bless your sweet eyes," answered the youth, with a gay laugh, "Don't you know that the best way to cheat suspicion is to brave it boldly. If we went creeping about every fool of a Siberian would take us for escaped convicts. But they will never suspect that chaps of our sort would ride into a garrison town. I bet you high I put it on them that I'm the emperor traveling in disguise."

"Hush!" warned Ivan. "Here comes a townsman."

The man who came up, a stupid-faced peasant, hardly raised his heavy eyes to the travelers as he passed. The young man stopped him with a sharp summons.

"Hold up, moujik!" he cried. "Just turn and show us the traveler's rest of this town, and we'll see if I can't fish you up a kopeck for the service."

"Haven't time," answered the peasant stolidly. "Ride on. You'll find it midway this street."

"Follow my nose, is it?" rejoined the youth sharply. "I could have done that without your advice. Come on, lads. I'm as hungry as a Russian wolf."

They rode briskly down the snow-covered street, through the falling flakes. Few persons were abroad. The sudden change in the temperature made the townsmen hug their stoves as yet. Within the past week summer had given place to winter.

"There it is," cried Peter, at length. "That wooden building, with the porch and pillars. And a good hotel, too, for this out-of-the-way town. I've eaten a spicy chop there before."

A group of soldiers was standing on the porch of the Siberian inn, who looked with curious interest at the travelers as they rode up. Strangers were not an every-day sight in that town.

But without the least attention to them, the youth rode up and sprung from his horse to the ground, throwing the reins to Peter.

"Jump down, Ivan," he cried, "and stir up the hostler of this caravansery! The folks here seem all dead or asleep. Be alive, now. See that those brutes are well cared for."

There was a tone of command in his voice which indicated that his companions were servants. This was also displayed in the difference of dress. Ivan and Peter wore the coarse attire of the Russian *moujik*—sheepskin coats, with the woolly side turned in, and heavy, wide-topped boots, into which their pantaloons were thrust.

The young man, on the contrary, was dressed in a handsome cloth cloak, lined with furs, while the rest of his attire was of the best French cut, as affected by most of the richer Russians.

He strode past the gazing soldiers without a glance toward them, and entered the hotel with a proud, free step that seemed to betoken a person of consequence.

"Landlord!" he cried impatiently. "Groom: Moujik! Where is everybody? Are you all asleep around this establishment? I hope you

aren't like your Northern bears, all going into a winter snooze as soon as the first snow falls."

This energetic summons soon brought several persons into sight.

The landlord—a fellow as fat as an English alderman—with a long pipe in his mouth; the landlady, as thin as charity, and with a nose like a crochet-hook; and several dull-faced servants, who looked as if they had not more than half a brain between them.

"Here you all are!" he energetically exclaimed; "Yakob, Susanna and the cook. Thought I'd fetch you. Stir your stumps, my hearties; make a raid on your grub-chest; behead a brace of chickens; wake up your oven! I haven't eaten the size of your hand for a week, and I've got two fellows outside who are good for a sheep at a sitting. Dinner now sharp in half an hour. If you keep me waiting longer, I'll eat the cook for a lunch!"

He looked so much in earnest that the cook, who was one of the persons present, backed hastily off, as if not sure but the hungry guest might be a cannibal. The others, too, stirred briskly around, while the youthful traveler flung himself into a chair, threw his fur-lined cloak on another, and stretched out his limbs with the ease of a person to whom all the world is a home.

There was a twinkle of fun in his black eyes as the group melted away before his commands, like a snow-heap under a hot sun.

"I suppose they take me for the great Nabob at least," he laughed. "That's the way to get along in this world. Stir it up hot wherever you go. Act as if you had just bought and paid for all creation and half the people will believe you. Good Heavens! how cheek does carry a man through thick and thin! I hope it will only carry me safe through this town. I've got into it, but I haven't got out of it yet. It might turn out to be Peter's bee-hive or Ivan's hornet's nest."

He sat deeply cogitating, his chin on his hand, while changing expressions marked his handsome face.

"Haven't I cut it fat?" he began again. "Here am I, Clark Cloverly, only a boy, but I've got into and out of more scrapes in the last year than any three men in Russia. I've learned the secrets of the Nihilists, and escaped from a St. Petersburg prison; I've ridden through Russia and snapped my fingers at the Cossacks; I've gone into the Siberian mines and rescued a convict; I've hunted sables with the Samoides, and railroaded on a reindeer sled with the Laplanders; and I've brought my two boys down south through Siberia without losing a hair, though we've had some close scrapes, and squeezed through some narrow holes. Here we are now in the garrison town of Trobilsk. How to get out I don't know; but you can bet high that sha'n't spoil my appetite for dinner. I'm Yankee clear through to the backbone, and no genuine Yankee ever says die while he's got a drop of blood in his veins or a mouthful of air in his lung. 'Tain't no easy job to take the kick out of the heels of a true-grit Yankee."

His soliloquy was interrupted by the entrance

of his two comrades, Peter and Ivan, on their return from the stables.

"Glad to see you, lads!" he exclaimed. "How are the beasts doing? Hope you've got them a fair show of oats."

"They are feeding high," answered Peter. "The creatures are hungry as bears."

"I hope you won't founder them. We may want them in prime condition for a sharp burst before the sun kisses the west to-night."

"You don't know a Russian horse," answered Ivan. "They can fast for a week, and take a week's feed at one spell."

"And a Russian man can do the same. I am getting a good dinner in shape, lads. Bet you I astonish these Siberians, when I get at it!"

"Siberians are not easily astonished in that direction," answered Ivan. "They are born gourmands."

Peter and Ivan quickly withdrew to the wall, and stood in a respectful attitude, with their caps in their hands, as footsteps were heard approaching the room.

The door opened and a person entered, at whom they all looked with a show of surprise. He was dressed in the uniform of a lieutenant in the Russian service. He removed his hat as he entered, and bowed to Clark with great politeness. The latter returned his salute easily, without rising.

"Pleased to see you," he said. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"The commandant has just heard of your arrival," rejoined the officer. "You will please wait on him at once and have your passport vised. He desires your presence without delay."

"No objections whatever," answered Clark, easily. "Only I've not had my dinner, and have been fasting since yesterday. Stir out, Pete, and see if the grub is ready. Take a seat, sir."

"I have no time," replied the officer, stiffly. "As for you, sir, the commandant's orders are peremptory. He is not used to listen to excuses for delay."

"So is my appetite peremptory, and I am not used to eating cold dinners," answered Clark, with equal stiffness. "Well, Peter, how is it? Is dinner ready?"

"It is on the table, smoking hot," replied Peter, who had just returned.

"You hear, sir," said Clark, with a wave of his hand. "Will you join me?"

"No, sir. Nor can I take back that answer."

"I'm afraid you'll take no other. What! let my dinner get cold while I'm dancing attendance at a commandant's heels? I wouldn't do it for the Governor-General of Siberia! You can take that back for answer if you like. My passport will keep cold, but my dinner won't keep hot. Tell your commandant that. If he thinks I am likely to flit between two bites at a chicken's wing, he has his regiment. He can patrol the town."

"Is that your answer?"

"Yes; by Julius Cæsar, it is! Why, I've been summoned before the emperor in St. Petersburg with less fuss than this. And you

can retail every word I say to your commandant. Come, will you join me at dinner?"

Clark rose, and bowed toward the dining-room.

"No, sir," was the angry reply. "And I much fear you will find your way to the commandant's quarters between a file of soldiers, for this message."

"All right. Let him send a regiment if he wishes. *Au revoir!* I will think of you at dinner."

Clark walked easily away, followed by his companions, with scared faces. The lieutenant angrily left the hotel.

"You will spoil all," cried Ivan, in a despairing tone. "You don't know the sort of man you are dealing with."

"I'll let him see the sort of boy he is dealing with," said Clark, sharply. "Come, lads, dinner's the word. Don't let that starched ape spoil your appetites."

CHAPTER II.

HOW CLARK PLAYED HIS FISH.

THAT the hungry travelers enjoyed their dinner need not be repeated. It was one of the things which, in the French idiom, goes without saying. An abundant and attractive meal smoked on the tables, Clark being seated in state at the central board, while his companions occupied a servants' table at the side.

The landlord had overheard something of Clark's reception of the lieutenant, and at once concluded that he must have some great lord to deal with. For a marvel he laid aside his constant comrade, the pipe, and himself waited on his guest at table.

"What can I help your honor to? You will find that fowl very tender and toothsome. It is of my own raising. A salad, did you say?"

"No, thank you," answered Clark. "I want something that fills up fast. No leaf or grass provender, if you please. That's prime mutton, landlord. Of your own raising, too?"

"No, my lord. But if you've been long in this country you know that there's no equal to Siberian mutton. Traveling westward, I presume."

"Yes; the potatoes, if you please," rejoined Clark, in an off-hand manner.

The inquisitive landlord drew back abashed at this choking off of his curiosity. Clark continued his dinner with all the appetite he had promised. Meanwhile Peter and Ivan, at the side-table, were doing full justice to the provender.

At this moment there came the sound of footsteps from without. They filed through the passage, and into the dining-room. Clark looked around with his usual unabashed ease. There stood the lieutenant, with a squad of bearded soldiers at his back, whose muskets came with a crash to the floor.

"Ah!" cried Clark easily. "You have thought better of it, I see. Glad to have you. There's enough for two yet. Sit down and try this capon!"

"I have already declined your invitation," rejoined the officer stiffly. "You will go with

me instantly. Such are the commandant's orders."

"And you've brought some persuaders with you, I see. But, isn't it slightly impolite to introduce such rough boon companions into a gentleman's dining-room? Keep cool, for a few minutes, my dear sir, and I am at your service."

Clark continued his meal, without a symptom of haste.

"Now, sir," cried the lieutenant in a rage, "if you are not ready in a minute, you will go like a culprit between a file of soldiers."

"Will I, my friend? If I do, I promise you to make it as hot for you as if you'd poured red pepper into your veal-pie. You may be a little mistaken in the man you're dealing with." He continued to eat, while the officer looked a little undecided at this threat, and the imperturbable boldness of the traveler.

"There," cried Clark, springing up. "That will do. I am obliged to you for waiting. Your arm, my dear sir. I shall accompany you with great pleasure."

It had been the intention of the lieutenant, who had been angered by the youthful stranger's disdain of his authority, to march him through the town like a culprit, in charge of a file of soldiers; but he did not know the metal he had to deal with. Clark Cloverly was not the sort of chap to be handled in that fashion. He took the lieutenant's arm in such a decisive fashion that the latter could not readily shake him off.

"At your service now," he said. "Lead off. Why, you do not know how I appreciate the honor of your company. And I am ever so anxious to meet your courteous commandant."

The lieutenant unwillingly allowed the impulsive youth to lead him away, while a look of awkward spite marked his broad face. But it was not easy to escape Clark's dashing earnestness. Down the street of the Siberian town he went, arm in arm with the lieutenant, while the squad of soldiers walked behind like an escort. It was a very different state of affairs than the spiteful officer had intended, and he continued sullen in spite of all Clark's lively sallies of wit.

"These are the quarters of the commandant," the lieutenant at length remarked, with a triumphant sneer. "We will see now what comes of your disdain of his orders. General Skobeloff is not the man to be played with by a traveling boy."

Clark looked up curiously at the handsome house before which they had stopped. He then took a quick observation of the surroundings.

"Don't you go into a brain fever about it, my friend," he remarked, dropping the lieutenant's arm. "The general and I will settle all that."

The Russian sullenly led the way into the mansion before them. They passed through a wide passage, and into a room at the right, which was fitted up as an office, and strewn with an abundance of official-looking papers.

In an easy chair, behind a table-desk, sat a stout, florid-faced individual, dressed in all the splendor of a Russian general's uniform. He looked up with an expression of wounded pride and dignity.

"Is this the man that dared refuse my summons?" he sharply asked.

"Yes, sir," answered the lieutenant, touching his cap.

"It seems to me, young sir, that you do not know much of the laws of Russia, or of the man you are dealing with," continued the general, severely. "Have you not learned that it is the first duty of a traveler to show his passport?"

"Pardon me, general," rejoined Clark, easily, as he quietly helped himself to a chair. "In my country it is the first duty of a hungry man to eat his dinner. Every country has its fashions, I suppose. But I'll set mine against yours for common-sense, any day."

He was as easy as if they had met for an ordinary conversation, while the frown of the general was utterly wasted on his reckless humor.

"You take it very coolly, young sir," was the severe answer, while the heavy brows of the general frowned ominously. "Do you know I could send you to prison, without seeing your passport, for contempt of authority?"

"I don't reckon there's much danger of that, general. You'd only have the trouble of ordering me out again. And I'm one of those easy-going fellows who are at home everywhere. Mercy on us, sir, I can see you know what a good dinner is yourself, and you are never the man to condemn a hungry traveler to a cold mess, when there's a hot one smoking before him. Here is my passport. I reckon you'll find it all right."

He drew the official document from his pocket and laid it before the general, whose heavy face had worn various expressions during Clark's speech. He was apparently a little puzzled by the sort of man he had to deal with.

He looked again at his imperturbable visitor through his shaggy brows. Clark played with a paper-knife which he had taken up, and looked as if half-inclined to whistle.

There is always a possibility of picking up the wrong chestnut-burr, and getting more stings than nuts for your pains. The commandant evidently thought it might be best to find out who this easy-going young gentleman was, ere proceeding to extremities.

He opened the passport and cast his eyes over its contents, looking up occasionally at his visitor as if to see if his appearance agreed with the description.

"Allen Herbert, *attache* to the British Embassy," he read, with a sudden change of expression. "Traveling on a pleasure excursion in Siberia. Mercy on us, sir. Why did you not give your name and rank at once, and save this unpleasant misunderstanding?"

Clark was tapping his finger-ends lightly with the paper-knife.

"Oh, mistakes will happen," he said, easily. "I knew you would be ready to apologize when you found the sort of stray sheep that had got into your pastures."

"Certainly, sir. Certainly I apologize," cried the general, profusely. "I am so sorry you did not call on me at once. Should have been happy to have you to dinner. The mistake is all through that stupid Lieutenant Kribach. I'll make him sweat for this."

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind," answered Clark. "I played with him a trifle, I admit. Where is he? I should like to make friends with him. I have no doubt he is a very clever fellow at bottom."

"But stupid—dog stupid. He is off again on some business of his own, I warrant. Do not hurry, sir. I should be glad to have you spend the afternoon with me. It is not often we meet a person fresh from Petersburg in this out-of-the-way place. Here is your passport."

It was no easy matter to get away from the commandant, who became profuse in his apologies. He kept Clark for an hour, answering his questions about St. Petersburg, and supplying him with all sorts of gossip about the court and capital. Finally, the somewhat uneasy visitor got away, declaring that it was necessary for him to look after his servants and horses. In fact, Clark was not quite easy in his mind about the business of the lieutenant. There was no telling what mischief might be hatching.

"Good-day, then, my dear Mr. Herbert," cried the commandant, shaking his hand very warmly. "Your visit has done me a world of good. You must come back again, you really must. Take tea with me. I will introduce you to some pleasant fellows of officers."

"I cannot say," answered Clark. "My time is limited, and I must be on the road again with little delay. At any rate, I will call on you before leaving."

He walked down the street of the little town. The snow-storm had ceased, but there was an inch of snow on the ground. A smile came to Clark's intelligent face.

"He's like all the rest," he remarked. "That passport doesn't come within a mile of describing me, yet they all swallow it wholesale. There's nothing like carrying things off with a stiff upper lip. It's astonishing how far a little brass goes in taking a man through the world. Ha! there's Peter, with a face as solemn as a graveyard. What's bu'sted now, I wonder?"

Peter met him near the steps of the hotel, looking preternaturally grave. It was very clear that something had gone amiss.

"What is it?" asked Clark, hastily. "You haven't more than three grandfathers to bury to-day, I hope."

"I fear there's the Old Nick to pay," rejoined the solemn servitor. "The stable has been entered, and our saddle-bags searched. That lieutenant has been here again."

"What!" cried Clark, sharply. "Anything taken? What were you doing—you and Ivan?"

"It was while we were still at dinner. The package of papers you had in your saddle-pocket has gone."

"Then the devil has broke loose, sure! Hang your appetites, that take two hours to a dinner! It's lucky if the fat isn't all in the fire through your stupidity. Come with me."

He led the way hastily to the hotel.

CHAPTER III.

A BREAK FOR LIBERTY.

THE visit of Clark Cloverly to that southern Siberian town had other objects than a mere ride through Asia, or an effort to escape from the Russian authorities. In previous stories we

have described some other events of the American boy's history, and particularly his ride through Russia, and his rescue of Ivan Strelitz from the convict workshops of Siberia.

He had, after the exploit, made his way to the country of the Laplanders. From there he could readily have escaped to Norway and Sweden; but he had first sent Peter south to communicate with his father in St. Petersburg, and had received an answer that changed all his plans.

In fact, a trusted servant of Mr. Cloverly had turned rascal, and absconded with cash and securities of considerable value. This man, Thomas Mason by name, had been traced to the borders of Siberia, and there lost sight of.

"He must be captured," wrote Mr. Cloverly to his son, "or I am ruined. I will do what I can, but he seems to have completely hidden his track. Can you not take a journey through Siberia in search of him? He is likely making for the far East. Perhaps for China. I send you a passport which ought to carry you safely through. The gentleman named in it got it for me out of friendship."

It was this unexpected news that brought Clark back into Siberia. His two companions had insisted on going with him. Ivan, the escaped convict, felt that he owed his life to the young American, and was ready to give it for him. As for Peter, he would have run his head into the fire for his young master.

They had already traversed more than two thousand miles of Siberian soil, with many hair-breadth escapes from arrest. So far, however, the passport had carried them through. Of the fugitive thief they had as yet learned nothing, and it began to look as if they were on a wild-goose chase.

We give these explanations to show how Clark Cloverly came to ride into the town of Trobilsk on that October morning, instead of being on the deck of a vessel bound for the free shores of America.

He well knew the consequences if he should be recognized. He would probably pass the remainder of his life as a convict in the Siberian mines. It was a terrible risk, yet the object of his journey was a highly important one.

As Clark re-entered the hotel, followed by the dejected Peter, he met Ivan, with a look of intense satisfaction on his face.

"The best of luck," he cried eagerly. "The trail is hit at last, if I am not badly cheated. I have been inquiring for Mason. I have found—"

"No matter what," Clark hastily interrupted. "That news will keep. To get out of this town without a rope around our necks is our present business. I was fool enough to leave papers in my saddle-pocket that will sell our whole game. And that jackanapes of a lieutenant has got them."

"The deuce!" cried Ivan, growing suddenly pale. "We will never get away. Why, the town is swarming with soldiers." He looked around him like a fox that has been cut off from his covert.

"Won't get away, eh? Don't you bet on that. I'm not the chap to give up the ship till the water is coming through the hatches. But,

there's one thing sure. We've got to work like beavers. Every second counts while the pot's boiling."

"What shall we do?" asked Ivan desperately. "By this time the whole town may be guarded. I doubt if there's more than a rat-hole left open."

"If there's half a rat-hole, we'll try our luck to get through it," rejoined Clark, with undiminished hope and spirit. "Make it your business, Ivan, to inspect the town. See if guards or patrols have been placed. Report yourself as quick as possible in front of the commandant's head-quarters."

"And what sh'ail I do?" asked Peter.

"Pay our score to the landlord. Get the horses saddled and out of the stable. There may come an order to detain them. Bring them to the same place, the commandant's head-quarters."

"What will you do?" asked Ivan.

"I will call on General Skobeloff. There's nothing like facing the music. I will beard the lion in his den. Away with you now. There's not a second to lose."

The three parted instantly, each hastening to perform his part in this quickly-conceived plan. It was hardly a plan, indeed, for Clark did not know what was to be done. But he had made up his mind on the spot to be ready for the chances, and to find out where the danger lay.

Less than half an hour had passed from his leaving General Skobeloff's office ere he again entered it, in a somewhat abrupt manner. His quick glance in an instant took in the situation. Opposite the commandant at the table sat the lieutenant. Between them was a small parcel of papers which they were examining. Clark recognized them as his own, though the general, with a very red face, instantly swept them off.

"Isn't this an abrupt way of entering a gentleman's office?" asked the general, with mingled confusion and anger.

Clark had on the instant taken his cue. There was no use to ask for his papers, or accuse the thief. The mischief was done. Escape from the consequences alone remained.

"Excuse me, general," he answered, in his easiest manner. "There was no attendant visible. I was too hasty, I acknowledge. But the pressing invitation you gave me must be my excuse. In fact, I find it advisable to continue my journey without delay, and I promised to see you again before going."

He seated himself without waiting for an invitation.

"Certainly, certainly," exclaimed the general, with a confused effort to speak heartily. "I was taken a little aback, I confess, but your apology is accepted. Glad to see you so soon again. You need not stay, lieutenant. We can finish our business later."

"Oh, no! I beg not," exclaimed Clark earnestly. "I am anxious to make better acquaintance with Lieutenant Kribach. He will surely enjoy a chat about St. Petersburg. I always like a larger audience than one," he laughingly concluded.

The lieutenant had risen, with an irresolute

countenance, muttering something about duties.

"Duties to the winds! Give a half-hour to pleasure, and you can have all the winter for duties. Make him sit down, general. I shall not forgive myself if he is driven out."

"There is no hurry, Kribach," answered the general, with a meaning look. "You will enjoy Mr. Herbert's conversation. Sit down. How was the emperor looking when you saw him last, Mr. Herbert?"

At this question Clark broke into a conversation about the emperor and his court, that proved so interesting to his auditors, that they quickly forgot all their uneasiness and anxiety. The apparent self-possession of the youth satisfied them that he knew nothing of their occupation when he entered.

Twenty minutes passed away thus. Clark was not only talking, he was listening at the same time. Certain desired sounds came to his ears. The whinny of his horse, the sound of voices outside that had a familiar tone.

He rose quietly and took his hat.

"I must say that I have passed a pleasant hour. You will please excuse me now. I must return to the hotel, where I directed my servants to get the horses ready for our further journey. I leave Trobilsk in half an hour. Farewell. If I should return this way I shall be happy to resume our acquaintance."

"Good-by. And a speedy journey," answered the general, politely rising and bowing.

Clark walked with a free step into the passage. The two men left behind looked at each other.

"You are in error, Kribach," exclaimed the general. "The man is honest and a gentleman."

"I am not sure of that," answered the lieutenant, stooping under the table for the fallen papers.

General Skobeloff walked from the room, and to the door, with the thought of taking a farewell glance at his departing guest. What was his utter surprise to find three horses drawn up in front of his mansion, the saddles of two occupied, while Clark was just springing to the back of the third.

"Why, Mr. Herbert," cried the general angrily, "what am I to understand from this?"

"Only that my servants have been quicker than I expected, and that Trobilsk is too much of a den of thieves for me to care to stay in. Good-by. I will give your respects to the Emperor of China."

The horses were off at a rapid pace down the snow-muffled street. The soldiers who stood by looked on with surprise. They had evidently received orders, but the presence of the commandant, and the starting of the cavalcade from his door, set them astray. It might not be safe to arrest the departure of the travelers under such circumstances.

The next instant Lieutenant Kribach came rushing from the house, with disheveled hair, and waving a paper in his hand.

"It is as I said!" he cried. "It is the Yankee refugee and Ivan the convict! Here is the whole story, and a printed description of the party! Let them be arrested at once!"

He thrust the paper into General Skobeloff's hand, but stopped speaking suddenly, as he noticed that gentleman's dismayed countenance.

"Are you sure of this, Kribach?"

"Yes. But what has happened? Who are those horsemen?"

"Our late guests," cried the general, with a burst of anger. "Hang me, if they haven't cheated us to our noses! To horse, gentlemen! To horse! Stir up the troopers! After the villains! Run them down, or we are eternally disgraced!"

"They can't get out of the town," exclaimed the lieutenant with a satisfied air. "I have picketed every road. I took good care to set the trap for our foxes."

"Good! But after them. That Yankee is bold as the deuce. He may play us some cunning trick yet."

CHAPTER IV.

OVER AN ICY PATHWAY.

THE town of Trobilsk was by no means a large one. At the pace at which the three riders were passing down its street they would soon be beyond its boundaries.

"Are we pursued?" asked Clark, looking back toward the group on the porch of General Skobeloff's mansion.

"There is no need of pursuit," answered Ivan, shaking his head doubtfully. "We are trapped, and that's worse."

"Ah! what do you mean?"

"They are ready for us. There is a picket of horsemen on every road leading from the town."

"Wheh! That's a blue lookout. That confounded lieutenant!"

"I told you we were fools to come here," said Peter mournfully.

"I know you did, Peter. And maybe we were. But we're not going to be fools enough to stay here, my boy."

He checked his horse and looked around him. They were at the edge of the town. It was as Ivan had said: across the road, a hundred paces in advance, stretched a body of horsemen.

"The game is up," declared Ivan sadly. "Every road is guarded in the same way. A fox couldn't get out. We are booked for the mines again."

Clark was still gazing in every direction with a keen eye that took in every feature of the surroundings.

"You don't know much about foxes, Ivan. Especially Yankee foxes. They are famous for creeping through slim holes. The roads are guarded, but the fields are not. Here's a broad stretch to our left. What kind of soil is it?"

"All swamp land," groaned Ivan. "The horses would sink to their fetlocks at every step."

"Not much, after last night's freeze. There's a good two inches of ice. And the grass will make footing for the horses. It will carry us like a breeze. If it don't we'll die game."

"Here come horsemen down the street," exclaimed Peter. "And the picket is coming up. We are surrounded."

A Hot Trail.

"Nary time! Not while the swamp side is open. Hurrah, my lads! Spur and whip! To the swamp! Sink or swim, to the swamp!"

He gave his horse the rein, turned with a sharp curve to the left, and rode briskly forward, followed by his faint-hearted companions.

A loud cry from the soldiers followed this movement. They put their horses more briskly in motion. Clark answered with a shout of defiance. The next minute they had left the hard level of the street, and struck the grassy plain, that stretched out far before them.

It was as yet hard, though uneven. The horses had good footing, and made rapid headway. Looking back Clark saw that the pursuers had drawn rein on the edge of the town, and were looking after the fugitives, with laughter and derisive shouts.

"Let him laugh that wins," remarked the bold boy. "They think we are going to be mired, and that they can pick us up like so many ripe chestnuts. I don't believe it. That freeze last night wasn't for nothing."

"Here is the edge of the swamp," said Ivan. "Will it bear us?"

"The troopers thinks it won't. But they don't know everything. Push on, my lads. It's neck or nothing now."

Before them stretched a broad flat, covered with long swamp grass. Through it gleamed an icy glitter. The next moment the iron-shod hoofs of the horses struck something that rung like iron under a hammer.

A few steps more, and Clark waved his cap triumph.

"The ice, my hearties! What did I tell you? It bears us up like a stone pavement. And the grass frozen in stops the horses from slipping. Good for our side! We can snap our fingers in old Skobeloff's face yet."

The horses stepped gingerly for a few moments. But when they found that the footing was secure, they stretched out with a freer pace.

"Heigho!" cried Clark, flinging his cap into the air, and catching it as it fell. "Never say die! Here we go, and the best horse wins."

His companions caught some of his enthusiasm, and their faces brightened as they pushed their steeds briskly forward. Now and then the ice cracked with a dangerous sound, but no hoof had yet gone through.

The Russian troopers had ceased their jeers. They stood for a minute gazing with surprised eyes on the daring venture of the fugitives. Then the group suddenly broke up. A part of it rode back into the town, while the others dashed forward over the meadow.

"They've caught the wind now!" cried the reckless youth. "Anyhow, the start's ours, and a fair start is half the race. I bet there's not a horse in the town can run us down. Let out, my hearties!" cried the daring young American. "It's heels now that's wanted, not brains. The best heels win. Hurrah!"

Away they went at a free pace over the frozen quagmire. At a considerable distance in the rear came on their pursuers, a group of six or eight horsemen.

The afternoon was now well advanced, and

the sun low down in the southwest. A cold wind blew across the marshes and cut their faces like a knife.

"That's just what we want to hold the ice stiff," remarked Clark cheerily. "What ails the beggars behind us? They seem to be floundering."

"They are heavier mounted than we," answered Ivan. "Their horses are cutting through the ice. Good! They are drawing rein—they are giving up the chase!"

"Hurrah! What did I tell you? We have thrown the hounds already."

"You don't know much about a Russian sleuthhound if you think so," rejoined Peter gloomily. "Look! It is just as I thou ht; There go parties out on the road to head us off."

It was as he said. On both sides of the swamp region ran high roads in a southerly direction. On each of these a body of Russian troopers was now riding, their long lance-heads glittering in the sun. The sound of their jangling accouterments could be heard.

"Cossack beggars!" growled Ivan—"hounds that would spit us on those lances as freely as they would so many frogs. And they've got the best of the game, with the hard road under their hoofs."

"They know what they're about," broke in Peter. "It's likely there's stiff ground ahead. They'll sweep in from the two sides and snatch us up."

Clark listened in silence to the remarks of his comrades, while his keen eye took in the situation. They were probably right. The pursuers had the advantage of solid footing. They would soon overlap the fugitives, and leave them in the rear. What thoughts passed through the mind of the caring youth he kept to himself.

"Push on," was all he said.

The hard ice rung with a bell-like clatter beneath their pounding hoofs. Now and then a horse slipped on the smooth surface, but the thick grass made a fair footing. The faithful beasts had done good work that day, but the rest and feed at Trobilsk had freshened them up, and they sped on without a sign of labor.

Clark's keen glances continued to take in every feature of the landscape. Not a movement of the pursuers escaped his eyes. Boy as he was, he felt all the responsibility of a leader. He had got his comrades into this scrape by foolhardy recklessness; he was bound to get them out again by wit and daring, if good fortune only favored.

"They have lapped us on both roads," declared Peter. "Their horses are fresher, and the roadway better footing."

"Their game is plain enough," continued Ivan. "See! some of them are leaving the road already, and riding into the fields at the side. Likely the swamp-lands end not far ahead. By picketing the edge, on the hard ground before us, they will have us in a net."

"I see," answered Clark briefly. "I'm afraid the dog's dead in that direction. There is no making our best pace on this ice, but I don't give up yet, lads. We've one trump card in our favor."

A Hot Trail.

"Ah! what is that?" they asked simultaneously.

"Slack up your speed slowly, as if the horses were giving out. There is no use to waste the strength of the poor brutes; we may need it for a burst."

"Do you think of breaking through their lines?"

"If nothing better offers. But it wouldn't be very safe. I think there's an easier way to discount them. Yonder's our trump card."

He pointed to the west, where the sun now lay close to the horizon, in a bank of heavy clouds.

Ivan looked at him with a growing meaning in his intelligent eyes, but Peter looked in stupid wonder.

"There's nothing there except the sun!" he cried.

"And that will be gone in half an hour. And in ten minutes after it sinks, the night will be on us thick. It's a cloudy sky. The night will be a black one. If we can only keep the Cossacks at bay till after dark, we can give them the go-by. I bet on that."

His comrades looked up in admiration. It was as Clark said. Here was a chance in their favor of which they had not thought.

"But the Cossacks know that too," declared Peter. "They'll make a line that we can't get through without having our ribs tickled with their long lances."

"But there are ways of getting past a net without swimming through the meshes," answered Clark, mysteriously. "Slack your speed still more, lads. The Cossacks are spreading their line. I've a notion the marsh ends two or three miles ahead."

They now drew into a jog trot that was little more than a walk. Clark continued to watch every movement of the pursuing troops. He noticed, to his satisfaction, that they had dropped none of their number on the road. The net was to be spread only in front.

Rapidly the sun sunk lower. The gloom of evening already began to dim the brightness of the day. In that high latitude the October sun sinks early to its rest, and rises late to its day's labors.

"And now, Ivan," resumed Clark, "there is another matter to be settled. What were you about to tell me when you left the hotel? Have you really found a trace of our game?"

"I think so," answered Ivan. "It was that I was about when our saddle-bags were rifled. I asked everybody about the hotel, and find that just such a man as the one we want passed through Trobilsk only three days ago."

"The deuce you say!" cried Clark, with sudden interest. "Did you get his name and description?"

"He gave a German name, Carl Kinnig. He had red hair, and red mustache and whiskers, and had a long scar across his right cheek."

"But what makes you think that was Mason? It is nothing like him."

"I found a wide-awake chambermaid, who knew a thing or two. She had seen foreigners before, and swore that this was no German, but an Englishman to the backbone. She was sure, too, that his red hair was false."

"Ah! That's prime news! How did she describe him?"

"He was a fellow of middle height, with broad shoulders. He had a sharp-pointed nose and thin lips. His eyes were gray, and had a foxy look in them. He walked with an awkward gait, as if he was not brought up to the good clothes he wore."

"By Jupiter, Ivan!" cried Clark, catching his hand. "I'll go a ten you've hit the mark. If it's so it was worth all our risk. Was he alone?"

"No. He had two fellows with him. He cut a great dash. Stayed two days in the town, and then left on the Irtish road. The one there to the right."

"That is our road then, Cossacks or no. I'll have Mason, if I follow him to the wall of China, and if the whole Russian army closed up the track." There was a ring of joyful decision in Clark's voice. "Look yonder, lads, the sun has pulled in his nose. The gloom is thickening. In ten minutes more it will be as dark as all Africa."

"And the Cossacks are waiting for us," rejoined Ivan, pointing ahead.

It was as he said. The troopers had spread themselves in a long line across the plain between the two roads. The swamp had evidently ended. Some of them were pushing back along the roads, as if to close the gap they had left in their patrol line. Erect on their horses, in the growing gloom of evening, they looked like giant statues, but statues that might start into life at any moment.

The fugitives still moved on, but now at a walk. Momentarily the gloom deepened. Now the horsemen ahead looked like dusky shadows. Now they faded, and disappeared. They were swallowed up in the darkness of a cloudy night.

"Now is our time," said Clark cautiously. "Turn your horses. We must retrace our steps."

"What is your plan?" asked Ivan, as he obeyed.

"The Cossacks have left the road unguarded in their rear. They have been too sure of our going straight on. Quick, before they discover their mistake."

Some lights from the distant town guided them on their way back. Verging to the right they soon struck the harder ground that bordered the swamp. Within ten minutes from their turn they felt the hard, smooth surface of the road beneath their horses' feet. Clark was right. The road was not patrolled.

"We must take to the fields again," he said quickly. "They may soon discover their mistake. But I've a notion there's solid soil on the other side. Push on."

On they rode, side by side, into the thick night, leaving their foaled pursuers to patrol in vain the empty meadows in advance.

CHAPTER V.

DRAWING THE FIRE OF A REGIMENT.

A HALF HOUR has passed since the fugitives turned back from the line of statue-like Cossacks, that like dread phantoms of the night

closed up their road to liberty. They have crossed the road and entered the meadows beyond, through which they have ridden sharply to the south.

The night has fully fallen. A pitchy darkness covers the whole landscape. Nothing is visible ten paces in advance. Thick clouds cover the sky. It is necessary to ride cautiously, lest their horses should strike upon some dangerous obstacle.

"I fear it is not all right ahead," said Ivan, striving to pierce the darkness with his keen vision.

"Why?"

"I heard sounds—There! Do you hear it now? The neighing of a horse."

"Have the confounded Cossacks stretched their line across in this direction?"

"Keep an eye open," exclaimed Peter. "There's a break in the clouds. The moon will peep through in a minute."

It proved as he said. The minute after the moon broke through a deep cloud cavity, and shed its silvery rays over the landscape.

The fugitives looked eagerly ahead. There, to their surprise and disappointment, stretched the line of phantom-like Cossacks, their lance-heads glittering in the moonbeams.

The revelation was but for an instant. The clouds again swept past, and blotted the moon from sight. But a whistle of warning from the soldiers told that they had sighted their prey. Clark drew up his horse with an angry clutch at the reins.

"The game's blocked in that direction," he declared. "The beggars have smelt our game, and have checkmated it."

"They were closing in, too," averred Ivan. "They are drawing their net. We are the fish that are to be found in it when it comes ashore."

"Don't you bet too high on that," answered Clark sharply. "It wouldn't be the first net that came in empty, if they have their pull for their pains."

"But what are we to do?" asked Peter helplessly. "They have not left an opening."

"There you are much mistaken, my boy. The mouth of the net is open. And yonder it is."

He pointed back to where some faint lights indicated the locality of the town.

"Trobilsk!" exclaimed Ivan. "You don't mean—?"

"I mean to ride through that town and strike for the other side."

"Why, they'll snap us up like a dog snapping up a bone."

"Desperate diseases need desperate remedies," answered Clark, coolly, as he turned his horse's head. "If you've a notion to stay here and be spitted on a Cossack lance, I haven't. Through that town I go, or I go down in the effort. The unexpected wins. They won't dream of our coming, and we'll take the bounds by surprise. Follow me, if you value liberty."

He gave his horse the rein and broke back over the grassy plain. There was no time now to hesitate. Ivan and Peter followed him in the desperate enterprise. It was a forlorn hope.

"Have your pistols ready," Clark warned.

"And keep you horses well in hand. It's a touch and go job."

The lights from the town guided their movements, and they rode back with a swift pace through the darkness.

Meanwhile within the town all was rest and quiet. Most of the soldiers were lounging about their quarters. A party of them rested on the porch of the hotel. In front of the commandant's house stood a group of horses, their riders being on the porch in company with General Skobeloff.

That individual was walking up and down the porch with short, angry strides, growling to himself like a chained mastiff.

"To think of the confounded impudence of the fellow!" he muttered. "Why, he might as well have twitched my nose and be done with it."

"You will have your turn, general," answered Lieutenant Kribach. "He will never get through the line of lances which I have stretched out for him. You can yet take your twitch at his nose."

"And by Jupiter I'll pull it roundly!" roared the furious commandant. "To think of his infernal Yankee impudence! And playing the part of a member of the British Embassy! He must have stolen that passport. Why, I never heard of his match! To bring a runaway convict under my very eyes! I'll send him to the deepest mine in Siberia for this."

"First catch your hare before you truss him," warned the colonel of the regiment, a grizzled veteran.

"Don't fear! We have the hare cut off from his cover," rejoined Kribach, in a tone of confidence.

Their conversation was at this instant cut short by an unexpected noise. This was no other than the sound of hoofs, muffled by the snow on the ground, yet quite distinguishable. The next instant, to the surprise of the company, three horsemen broke into view in the glimmer of light that came from the house. What was their astonishment to recognize, at a glance, the daring fugitives.

Clark, with unparalleled boldness and assurance, drew up his horse in front of the porch, and lifted his hat with a courteous gesture.

"Much obliged, general," he said, "for the neat surprise you laid out for me in front. But I don't choose to play fish for your net. You're a smart old coon, I give in, but you haven't yet learned all the sides of a Yankee trick. Goodby. Any orders for the emperor?"

"Stop! Villain! Thief! Convict! Stop, on your life! Gentlemen, to horse! Spread the alarm! Wing the villain, somebody!"

His words were echoed by the sharp report of a pistol. A double report in fact. It was Lieutenant Kribach that had fired. But from the darkness in front came a bullet from Ivan's pistol, and the lieutenant tottered back with a groan, while the bullet from his weapon sung far over the head of the fugitive.

The sound of hoofs again broke for an instant on the air. The three fugitives vanished again into the darkness. It seemed as if a vision of the night had broke for an instant upon their eyes, and then suddenly disappeared,

But a mocking laugh came back to their ears. The smell of powder was in the air. Lieutenant Kribach lay wounded and groaning against the wall. All this was reality.

"To horse, gentlemen!" repeated the general, as he fired into the darkness, without aim. "To horse! Their animals must be worn out! The daring rascals! Ride them down, on your lives, and fetch them to me."

The officers had not waited for this summons. They had already sprung for their horses, which stood ready saddled before the porch.

At the same time the soldiers, who occupied the hotel porch, alarmed by the pistol-shots, were hastening down into the road, in wonder as to what this meant.

Out of the gloom there broke upon them the forms of the three horsemen, riding onward at a furious gallop.

"Out of our way!" said the foremost of these, in a harsh tone. "Back, or we'll ride you down!"

They came thundering on. The soldiers drew back. All but one, who sprung at the bridle of the nearest horse. It was a perilous movement for him. There came a keen flash, a sharp report, and with a cry of pain the risky fellow fell backward into the snow.

"Down!" warned the leading horseman, in a low tone.

The riders bent to their horses' necks, and just in time to escape a volley of bullets that whistled past their ears. There was no time for this favor to be repeated. Two more leaps carried the springing horses out of sight, into the thick gloom of the night.

But the peril was yet far from past. The fugitives were now in the very heart of the town, which was alive with soldiers, and the warning shots, and the cries of the pursuing horsemen in the rear, had widely spread the alarm. Lights flashed here and there. Loud voices were heard. The rat-tat-tat of an alarm-drum broke upon the air. The troopers rushed for their horses and weapons. The event of the afternoon had put them on the *qui vive*.

Yet onward rode the fugitives, grim, silent, and shadowy. Their horses roused to their utmost speed, rushed side by side, in a dashing gallop down the broad, snow-covered street. There was no need of whip or spur. The intelligent animals seemed instinctively to know what was required of them, and put out all the strength of their limbs. They were horses of the steppes, and had been trained for speed and bottom. They were good for a ride of twenty hours on a stretch.

A bright light broke out at the end of the town they were approaching. It was in this direction that the alarm-drum sounded.

"The barracks lie there," declared Ivan. "We shall have the regiment to face. Shall we not turn into the side street ahead?"

"The road lies past the barracks?"

"Yes."

"Then we must ride past them and take our chances. A lost second now is a lost game. See, there's only the one light, and that's held by a fellow on the platform yonder. If it was put out we might dash by in the darkness. You are a prime shot, Ivan. Can you hit it?"

"I can try," answered Ivan, confidently.

They were not twenty paces distant. The light already revealed their approach. The soldiers were rushing from the barracks, grasping their carbines.

A quick aim—a flash—a report—the lamp fell from the hand of its holder to the ground, shattered into a hundred fragments. Darkness fell over the scene, doubly deep for its suddenness.

Three great shadows broke for an instant into sight. A line of soldiers who had hastily stretched across the street, were ridden down like grass-blades. The shadows vanished again. Darkness once more resumed its reign. The armed soldiers poured a hasty volley from their carbines down the street. It only brought back a disdainful laugh. It was too wild to be effective.

Ere it could be repeated, with better aim, the squad of pursuing officers rode briskly past.

"Where are they?"

"Not two hundred yards ahead."

"We will bring them. You need not turn out."

The chase swept on into the darkness. The sound of hoofs was for a minute audible. Then all vanished, sound and sight. The night had swallowed up its prey.

The road they were on was one that led to the northeast. The picket which had been placed on it in the afternoon had been withdrawn ere night, when the fugitives had ridden south. It seemed now a question of power of horse-flesh.

The squad of officers were well-mounted, and rode furiously onward, cursing the lagging moon.

They expected readily to ride down the fugitives, whose horses must be severely blown. But after a profitless ride of five or six miles, they drew up in despair.

"They have taken to the open country, for a fortune," exclaimed the leading officer. "We have no hope of overtaking them to-night. But it is impossible for them to escape. The whole country can be warned to-morrow."

They turned back, sadly disappointed, and conversing about their ill-luck, and the reckless boldness of the Yankee.

"I cannot but admire the rascal," declared one. "I would like to lead a regiment made up of men like that."

They rode briskly on.

"Much obliged," came a voice from the roadside, in guarded accents. "But I am not ready to enlist in a Russian regiment yet. Now that you've had your ride out, and have given our horses a breathing-spell, we'll push on, with your permission."

The fugitives drew up from the deep depression by the roadside, in which their horses had stood for the last twenty minutes, while their pursuers had ridden twice past without perceiving them.

"A bold stroke is often the best stroke, you see, lads," laughed Clark gayly. "We have thrown the hounds from our track, and have a straight road before us."

"And where shall we harbor for the night?" asked Ivan.

"With the surly chap who gave us a short answer this afternoon," answered Clark. "I've a notion I can make some capital out of that sturdy coon."

A ten-mile ride brought them to the door of a habitation that stood a short distance back from the road. Clark sprung from his horse, and struck sharply with his whip-handle on the door, while the barking of dogs echoed the sounds.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHEAP BARGAIN.

A DIM oil lamp shed its light over a room with sides of logs, and furnished in the rudest and most primitive fashion. On one side stood a great Russian stove, that filled the room with warm air. On the other was a rough board table, set out with bacon and coarse bread, on which three fugitives were making a frugal supper.

Near by sat a black browed Russian, his chin on his hands, and a sullen frown on his face, watching his guests as if he gave them no good will with their supper.

"There," cried Clark, with a satisfied gesture. "Rough fare; but bunger is a good sance. Guess I'll do for to-night. And now for a talk with the gentleman of the house."

"The gentleman of the house wants no talk with you or yours," answered the host, in a gruff voice. "I didn't ask for your company. You forced yourself on me. Now take your sleep, and take your leave, and the least said the soonest mended."

"You are short and sweet in your welcome, at any rate," answered Clark coolly, as he drew forward his chair. "But if you won't talk maybe you will listen. Do you know who we are?"

"I don't care who. Some of the emperor's pets, I reckon," was the gruff reply.

"Then you don't love the emperor's pets? So much the better. Do you know that we are fugitives from justice? This man is an escaped convict. I am a—"

"Lord save us!" cried Ivan, springing up, hastily. "What are you about, Mr. Cloverly?"

"About telling the truth," was Clark's reply. "We have been pursued by the regiment at Trobilsk. We have ridden through the town in the face of the garrison, and snapped our fingers under the general's nose. And there's the very Old Boy stirred up behind us. Now, you've heard it all. You can make a fifty-rouble reward by selling us to General Skobeloff."

The host was now sitting bolt upright, staring at his free-speaking guest with eyes that seemed ready to start from his head.

"The devil!" he muttered. "Is this the truth?"

"I have not ridden across Siberia to retail lies."

"I didn't ask you your business. Why do you trouble me with it?"

During Clark's abrupt confession Ivan had been fuming with disgust, while Peter lay back in terror in his seat, making all sorts of wild signs to his reckless young master. But the

daring youth went on without the least attention to their dismay.

"You have your choice," continued Clark. "You can betray us, or rescue us."

The surly Russian continued to look at him from between his dark brows. There was a strange look in his eyes.

"I don't intend to do either," he said. "I don't love soldiers, and won't help them. As for you, you found your way here, and can find it away, again. I have given you your supper. A bed is ready for you. Take your snooze and be off. I will rouse you two hours before daylight. You will want a good start if that devil Skobeloff is on your track."

He turned his back as if he had nothing more to say. But Clark was not to be choked off so easily.

"You are an old hunter? You know the country hereabouts?"

"What if I do?" snapped the Russian.

"I want you for guide."

"Never. You may guide yourself."

"See here, Paul Previt'sch, I know you," continued Clark, with a sharp accent. "I have two things to say to you. You will not betray me to General Skobeloff, as you think of doing, because, if you do, I will report you to the general as a runaway convict from the Nertchinsk mines."

The Russian sprung to his feet with a terrified look on his bronzed face.

"It is a lie! How—"

"It is no lie," broke in Ivan sternly. "I have been in the mines myself. I don't forget a face."

Paul Previt'sch sunk back on his bench, and covered his face with his hands, thoroughly dismayed by this discovery.

"Don't be scared," continued Clark. "Deal square with me, and I will with you. You are a hunter. You know the country. Guide me safely out of this peril and it will be a hundred roubles in your pocket."

At this offer Paul lifted his head, and stared steadily at his guests.

"A hundred roubles?" he repeated.

"Just so. Half down. Half when we are clear of the danger."

Paul continued to look at him.

"It is a doubtful business."

"Suppose it is. We are not babies or kittens."

"You don't know Skobeloff like I do, or you wouldn't have drawn rein while your horse could creep. If you twitted him as you say, he will rouse the whole country against you. By this time to-morrow there won't be a soldier within fifty miles that will not be on your track."

"By this time to-morrow, then, we must be more than fifty miles away. We must run faster than the news can follow. You will guide us?"

"One hundred roubles?"

"Fifty when we set foot in stirrup. Fifty when we are safe away."

"If we are caught we will all go to the Nertchinsk mines," said Paul doubtfully. "Do you know what that means?"

"No,"

"It means hell on earth. Far better the coffin than the mines. It means the whip for a thought; the dungeon for a word; the bullet for an effort to escape."

"I would begin, then, with the bullet," answered the bold American lad. "See here, Paul, I have yet another fish to fry. I will double the reward if you help me in it."

"Ha!" cried Paul, with new interest.

"I am in pursuit of a runaway thief. English. Red hair and beard. Passed this way within a week."

"I saw him," remarked Paul.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Put me on his track and I will make your reward two hundred roubles."

"Say three hundred, and I will promise to run him down," answered Paul confidently. "He is making for the Mongolian steppes. We will find him somewhere among the cattle-drivers. For that money I will cut loose from Siberia, and spend the rest of my days in a safer and happier land."

"It is a bargain," answered Clark, joyfully. "And I will add another hundred to it if I find him with his plunder on him. You are our man. And now, what is the programme?"

"We must leave here three hours before daylight. Our only chance is to take to the mountains. It will be a dark ride, but I can set you at their foot by daybreak. And then for crag and cliff, and mountain pass. We will be hotly chased. Old Skobeloff will hunt you like a wolf. Your money will be well spent, for there is not a man within fifty miles would take the risk that I am doing."

"Bless you, I've taken a worse risk inside an hour, and here I am with a whole skin. But sleep's the word now, my lads. We want fresh horses and fresh brains for our work to-morrow."

In a half-hour afterward every soul within the roadside edifice was lost in deep slumber.

Clark had made a lucky bargain, and he knew it. Ivan had seen the man the year before in the mines, and recognized him at sight. Of course he might have gained his freedom by good conduct; but there was a chance that he had made his escape. Clark worked on that bare chance, and luckily hit the mark.

They all slept now as soundly as if they had been in an American bed. There was a noose around their host's neck that saved them from all danger of treachery on his part. The long night passed on. The wind rose and howled shrilly without, but it was warm as toast within. Still they slept on, and the night was verging rapidly toward its end.

But their Siberian host had not forgotten his bargain. He was early astir, and called them up with a loud voice.

"Come," he cried, in a tone that was naturally harsh. "You've had your snooze out. It is time to be astir. Awake. The morning draws near."

Up they sprung at the summons.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Peter, rubbing his eyes. "Did you say you wanted hot water for shaving?"

A loud laugh called him to his senses. The

poor fellow had been dreaming that he was a gentleman's valet in St. Petersburg.

"The minutes count now," declared Paul, in a quick, decided tone. "Look after your horses, and get them ready for the road. I will make my preparations."

"Come!" exclaimed Clark briefly.

He left the house, followed by his two companions. It was yet quite dark, but the low-down moon broke faintly through the dim mask of the clouds.

A loud neigh from the horses as they entered the stables showed that they were awake and ready for the road. There was a fourth horse in the stable, that belonged to Paul, a long-limbed, full-chested roadster.

"Looks as if he had wind and speed," said Clark. "We want that, for it will take a prime goer to keep pace with our horses."

In half an hour afterward they were on the road, having hastily eaten a frugal breakfast. Paul took the lead, on his strong beast, over whose crupper he had hung a heavy parcel.

"The moon is low in the West!" he remarked, "but it will give us an hour's light yet. Then for another spell we will have the dark hour before day. We must make the most of these two hours of night. Away."

Off they rode, over the snowy ground. The faint moon-rays, and the white surface, gave light enough for them to make rapid speed. The horses had fully recovered from their fatigue, and were fresh as deer. Yet the wind still blew shrill and cold. The weather was freezing, and they felt it bitterly in their first moments from the steaming heat of the room in which they had slept.

"You Russians must have cast-iron constitutions," remarked Clark, with a shiver. "You step from an oven into a snow bath as we would walk from room to room. It is always too hot indoors, and too cold out of doors, and your confounded climate is brimful of roasts and agues."

"We are brought up to it," laughed Ivan. "I have taken a night's sleep on a snowbank before now."

"Hang me if I would care to be such a salamander."

Paul led for a short distance on the road that passed his house. Then he struck eastward across the fields, which here were open and level.

After three or four miles of this field work they struck a narrow lane, or horse track, that led to the southeast.

In an hour, as he had said, the moon sunk below the horizon, and the darkness grew much deeper.

He pointed off to the west, where a faint light shone from what seemed a long distance.

"Do you know the place?" he asked.

"No."

"It is Trobilsk."

"The deuce!"

"Likely they are astir by this time and preparing to send out their foraging parties. Fortunately we have ten miles' start of them!"

Silence followed. They rode briskly on. Dark as it was, Paul seemed to have the eyes of a cat. The white surface made the road faintly

visible, but only one thoroughly familiar with the way could have kept on at his reckless pace through such darkness.

A half-hour more passed by. The shadows seemed to grow yet denser.

"The sun ought to be touching the sky by this time," said Clark; "but it is as black as ebony. There seems to be a cloud of charcoal settled down yonder ahead of us."

Paul laughed grimly.

"It is for that cloud we are heading," he remarked. "That is the mountain chain."

"The mountains? Then hey for liberty! You are a prime guide, Paul. The darkness is nothing to your eyes."

"Hush!" warned Paul, in that tone of caution, "I scent trouble ahead. Be still as mice. Keep your horses on the snow. Their tread must not be heard."

"What is it?"

"Hush! you will soon know."

He drew up his animal to a slow trot, and craned his neck ahead, as if seeking to pierce the darkness of the night.

Clark's quick ears now caught the sounds of a faint stir and of low voices. Something was moving in front of them.

Suddenly there came the loud neigh of a horse. It was answered by one of the steeds of the fugitives.

"Drat that brute!" cried Paul savagely. "The game's up. Whip and spur, pistol in hand, and ride for your lives!"

The horses touched by the whip sprung briskly forward, and broke into a sharp gallop. In a moment they rounded a slight bend in the road ahead, and were in the midst of a party of men, who were hastily rising as from a bivouac slumber. Some of them were rubbing their eyes as if not yet awake.

The next instant the horses were among them. Down they went to right and left, one of them felled by a sharp blow from Paul's whip-handle.

Ere they could well know what had happened, the horses were past, and left them tumbled in heaps upon the ground. Curses and groans followed, loud cries and the spiteful patter of one or two pistol shots.

"Who are they?" asked Clark in surprise.

"A Russian picket. One of Skobeloff's advance parties. Push on. They will be on our track within two minutes!"

"Lord! didn't we take them on the wing?" laughed Clark, as he gave his horse the whip.

CHAPTER VII.

A BLIND ALLEY IN THE MOUNTAINS.

A BROAD, clear streak upon the eastern sky told the story of the rising sun. The clouds had thinned as morning drew nigh, and a faint light already made dimly visible the features of the landscape.

It was needed. There had been little difficulty in going across the level country, with its every hollow filled up with frozen snow, but they had left the level and were now in the mountains, where danger lurked at every step.

For half an hour, since their surprise of the Russian picket, they had pushed onward, over

a track that rose at every step. Now and then the horses stumbled on a concealed stone, or slipped in a crevice.

They were obliged to check their speed, and proceed cautiously. Only for Paul's intimate knowledge of the country it would have been impossible to proceed at all.

"There comes the glimmer of day!" cried Clark joyfully. "This climbing mountains in the dark is the worst sort of played-out nonsense. Where are the troopers? On our track?"

"Not a bit of it," answered Paul decisively. "They won't dare stir till daylight. Only that I know the pass, we might have broken our necks before now."

"You're a prime guide, Paul. It was a lucky hit to light on you. Mercy on us! didn't we tumble that picket over neatly?"

He burst into a gay laugh at the thought.

"I'd give my horse if we'd never seen them," rejoined Paul, with a gloomy shake of the head.

"Why?"

"Because it puts the soldiers on our track. Only for that, they might have lost hours in trying to trace us."

"By Jove, you're right!" exclaimed Clark. "That way, it was unlucky. But never say die; we'll fling them yet. There's many a hiding-place in the mountains, and many a natural fort where four men can defy a regiment. What say you, Ivan?"

"We've come through many a danger. We can risk a few more."

"And you, Peter?"

"You have a lucky star, Mr. Clark. We are safe while we follow it."

"Bravo! That's the talk I like. And see yonder. The sun-rays have just touched that snowy peak. The day is before us, with all its dangers and its hopes. Push on merrily."

The light had now grown much stronger, and they could plainly make out the surrounding scenery. The plain had disappeared. They were in a narrow mountain pass, with a brawling stream rushing down beside them. On each side rose a rocky wall, of dark, frowning stone, whose summits seemed to pierce the sky. Far onward, up the pass, could be seen the distant peaks of the mountain chain. On one of these, that was white with snow, the first rays of the sun had just fallen, and shone with a rosy luster, like a beacon-light to lead them onward. There was hope in that glowing torch of the morning.

Paul led the way. The others followed in a line, along the narrow path, whose dangers now became visible. A false step would have flung them into the brawling stream, that roared like a torrent as it ran over the rocks.

The way led upward, at a sharp angle. They had to go forward at a walk, picking their way over the rough stones that covered the pathway. At one point they had to spring from their horses, and lead them around a jutting rock. At another it was necessary to cross the stream. This was done with great difficulty, and Peter and his horse came near being swept downward by the torrent. Only that Ivan caught his bridle, and dragged him up on the rocks, he would have been lost.

"By thunder, it is enough to set one's teeth on edge!" exclaimed Clark. "Is there much of this sort of road?"

"That's one of the worst bits," answered Paul. "We can make better headway now."

The path here was broader and more level. They put their horses into a canter and rode briskly forward. There was something exhilarating in the fresh mountain air, that put them all in spirit despite the danger.

Yet it was not easy to forget that the Russian bulldogs were on their track, and that for miles around, the whole country would be soon roused against them.

"But let them come. We'll give them lead pills to cure their dyspepsia," said Clark, as he laid his hand on the rifle that was swung over his shoulder.

Each of the party was armed with a similar weapon which they had obtained at Paul's cottage.

They were now on the summit of a slight eminence in the path. Paul came to a halt and looked back. The mountain ravine lay open for a long distance before them. Afar off some faint figures were visible, creeping like ants along the edge of the rock wall.

"It is as I expected," declared the guide. "Yonder come the sleuth-hounds. They are on the track of the deer. But, by Heaven, they may find their deer turn to tigers! They will not take me like a bird in a net."

"Nor me," cried Clark. "Hurry on before they see us."

"It is too late. They have seen us already. They are pushing on with the hope to catch us in a trap." Paul had a glass to his eye as he spoke. "Lucky I know something about these mountains. I have not hunted them a year for nothing."

They pushed onward, as rapidly as possible, up the pass. In some places it was necessary to go at a walk. In others they could move more rapidly. The sun rose in the sky and poured its light down into the ravine, touching the fleecy foam of the down rushing torrent.

For two hours they picked their way onward in this manner. They were now high up in the mountains. At length they came out upon the summit of a rounded knob, far above the stream, that dashed through the ravine beneath.

"I have climbed this peak on purpose," remarked Paul. "See. The pass we came by is not visible from here, but it opens on two other passes, to the right and the left. I know what we have before us. I want to know what we have behind us."

He took the field glass from his pocket, and adjusted it to his eyes. Each of the two passes was closely examined. To Clark and his companions there was nothing visible but dark rocks, and the occasional glint of water, with here and there the waving foliage of a cluster of pines. Clark looked at Paul, who shook his head grimly.

"The country is up," he said. "Look for yourself."

It was as he said. The glass brought into view a line of moving figures in either pass.

"Skobeloff is a shrewd old hunter," exclaimed

Paul. "He picketed every road and pass last night. The picket we rode through has sent word to the guards of the other passes. They are all in motion, drawing in on us from three directions. I tell you, there is a hot business before us."

Clark closed the glass and handed it back, with a gesture of defiance.

"At any rate the danger is all behind. There is a clear field ahead," he answered. "We can push on faster than the news can spread, and make it hot for them if they press us too closely."

"If we were past the mountain chain and on the open ground beyond, I would feel safer," replied Paul. "There is a mountain pocket ahead of us. A regular blind alley in the rocks. It is into that the soldiers are trying to drive us. They fancy they have us in a safe trap."

"And what do you think?"

"There is a way out. But it is a dangerous one, fit only for the feet of a hunter. We cannot take our horses through it."

"Then we will go on foot."

Paul shook his head.

"We will want horses on the other side. I would prefer to make a stand and try to fight them off."

"Fight's the word then, if you say it. If bullets won't serve, we will try what fortune there is in feet. Have you got a plan laid?"

"Yes."

"We leave it to you, then. What do you say, lads?"

"We are with you, Clark Cloverly, to the death," answered Peter and Ivan, as with one voice.

"You hear, Paul. Lead on."

The guide put his horse again to the trot down the opposite side of the hill they had ascended. There was a stern, determined look upon every face that told of high resolve. They were not to be taken like sheep in a pen, as the Russian drovers were likely to find.

For three hours they toiled onward, along a route that grew more difficult at every step. The rock walls towered above them a thousand feet in height. The way was strewn, here and there, with large boulders, which were very difficult to pass. In some places cascades came dashing over the rock walls, from such a height that they were blown into mist in the air. The wind that drew down the ravine was biting cold, as if it had been chilled by the distant snow-clad peaks.

They had now reached a great height in the mountains. Their horses were panting with the labor they had endured, and breathed the thin mountain air with some difficulty. Paul sprung from his saddle.

"The beasts are done out," he said. "We must trust to our legs for a while."

The others followed his example. A few steps more and there came to their ears a rushing sound. Turning a corner in the pass a remarkable scene was revealed. A broad stream came rushing in foam across their track, pouring out from a narrow ravine that cut into the mountain wall, and dashing into another ravine on the other side of the track.

They paused and looked down its course,

The ravine was about twenty feet wide, but was filled from side to side by the rushing flood.

Paul stood on its banks, looking longingly downward.

"I'd give half my reward if I was two hundred yards down that channel," he remarked.

"Why?"

"It opens below, and there is a narrow path beside the water, which leads down through the mountains. But it is safer to face the soldiers than that torrent."

"And what is your other mode of escape?"

"It is a goat's track across the mountains, that is fit only for a hunter's feet. You will need to be sure-footed to try it; and will have to leave these good horses behind. Do you see the horned creature yonder?"

He pointed up the pass. A graceful, stag-like creature, with branching antlers, was bounding up a steep rock face, that seemed almost perpendicular.

"That is the Maral, the stag of the mountains. Where it is going we will have to follow. But it is not safe footing for a plainsman."

"It looks as if you had led us into a blind alley for certain," said Clark discontentedly. "We must either follow a goat's path up a precipice, or dive like a salmon through a mountain torrent. These are doubtful games. Have you nothing else in view?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"To make a stand, and try to drive off the soldiers."

"That's more in the vein. Where shall the stand be made?"

"Here."

"Here?" Clark looked around him, with inquiring glances.

It needed no skill to perceive that the spot was well chosen. Around them was a broad swell in the pass. But behind, up the route they had just traversed, it grew very narrow and rock-bound. There was a sharp turn in its course, within which lay several large boulders. Below these the route was for some distance steep and narrow. On each side the walls were nearly perpendicular.

"It is gloriously chosen!" cried Ivan, in enthusiasm. "It is a spot where one man might stop an army."

The others assented to this conclusion. No better natural fort could have been selected.

"There are three results open before us," remarked Paul. "If we can beat off the soldiers, we can return and seek some easier way across the mountains. If they hold their own, or are too much for us, the track of the Maral remains."

"And if we are cut off from that the way of the torrent is open."

"Hardly," answered the grim guide. "I doubt if horse or man could swim it and live."

"Has it ever been tried?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"It may be our businesss to have to try it, then. If we drown we will go down like free men, instead of living like slaves, chained in a Siberian mine. At any rate, the game is laid. We will make this our fort. I wager

that more than one Russian bites the dust before we are taken. And now let us try some grub. We may have to go hungry for hours to come."

They spread a frugal meal on the bare surface of the rock, and ate it silently. The occasion was too serious a one to spend in idle chat. The horses were also watered, and left to crop the scanty herbage on the sides of the rocky inclosure.

An hour glided by. And now, from down the pass, came the rattle of accouterments. The pursuit was drawing near.

CHAPTER VIII.

STORMING THE PASS.

THE sun had now risen high into the heavens, and poured its rays into the mountain pass. Beneath its beams the foam of the torrent sparkled with jeweled luster, flinging its pearly drops up to catch the gleams of the sunlight, and falling back in a shower of diamond dust. The keen wind lulled, and it grew warm under the enlivening beams.

But all this peace and brightness of nature was in strange contrast to the storm of human passions that lurked in that sunny pass.

Behind the rocky portal of the natural stronghold lay the fugitives, rifle in hand, and with frowning brows and close-set lips, waiting in stern determination the onset of their foes. In front of them toiled the soldiers up the pass, the head of the line just in view, in blind unconsciousness of the danger that stared them in the face.

The clear young voice of Clark rung out in sharp accents on the morning air, bringing the line to a sudden stop.

"Halt, there!" he cried. "You have come your distance now. A step more and we will check you with bullets instead of words."

The foremost riders recoiled at this warning. They had not dreamed of the fugitives making a stand.

A uniformed officer rode to the front.

"Surrender!" he cried, "or it will be worse for you. We have our orders to take you back to General Skobeloff, dead or alive."

"You will not take us alive," declared Clark boldly. "And if you try to take us dead we promise you to kill ten for one. We have the whip-hand of you. If you are wise you will draw off your men and save their bacon."

"Do you know that we have a hundred to your four?"

"I would not care if you had a thousand. We hold the fort."

"Once more, will you surrender?"

"Never. Will you take my warning? We don't want to slaughter your men. But we have our lives to fight for. Once more, will you draw off your forces?"

"Never. We will have you, dead or alive."

"Fight's the word, then. Look out for yourself."

The officer turned and gave a word of command to his men. In an instant a squad of them put the spur to their horses and charged briskly up the narrow way.

There came from above a keen flash, the sharp report of a rifle, and the horse of the offi-

cer staggered and fell, flinging his rider violently to the ground.

The animal had fallen across the narrowest part of the way, exactly in front of the charging horsemen. They came stumbling over the falling mass, not able to check their impetuous speed. In an instant there was a dense group of stumbling and crowded horses.

Another rifle-shot rung out. One of the horses wildly reared, screaming with pain, and fell in a dead mass, bringing another to the ground with him. The fallen officer scrambled out on hands and knees, with a comical show of fear. Those singing bullets had taken all the dignity out of him.

A shout of derision came from behind the rocks up the pass.

"That's the sort of corn we have for your mill. We've dropped horses so far. We'll drop men next, if you don't take warning and draw out."

The horsemen drew hastily back, while a volley of bullets sung up the ravine, pattering on the sheltering rocks.

There was no reply to this other than a derisive laugh. The four fugitives lay at full length behind the boulders that closed the path, their rifle-barrels extended through slight crevices between the rocks. It was almost impossible for a bullet to reach them.

"By Jove, friend Paul, you have a good eye for a fort!" exclaimed Clark. "What do you think? Will they take warning and back out?"

"Not they," answered Paul, decisively. "Why the whole party would be cashiered if they retired with sound skins from a party of four men. We will have to leave our mark on their bides."

"I'm the man for that," cried Ivan, savagely. "Any one who has been a convict in a Siberian mine has no love for a Russian soldier."

"Look out! They are preparing for another rush," warned Peter.

The warning was well given. A number of the troopers had dismounted, and stationed themselves, carbine in hand, in a partly protected position, on the sides of the pass. Another group had drawn their horses well together for a dash up the ravine. The two fallen horses, indeed, nearly closed up the way, only a narrow opening remaining between them and the rock-wall of the ravine.

A word of command, and a patter of bullets rained on the rocks. At the same instant the horsemen dashed at full speed up the acclivity. A second volley of bullets followed, with the intention of forcing the fugitives to keep under cover. But they were not the sort to be caught by any such trick.

"Don't fire all at once," cried Clark. "Now's your time. Give them a dropping fire."

Paul's piece rung out shrilly. The old hunter was not the man to waste a shot. The bullet passed through the neck of a horse, and flying on, struck a rider behind, full in the breast. The animal reared, and turned to plunge down the path, making a confusion in the line.

The report of Peter's and Ivan's pieces next rung out. At that distance it was impossible to miss. Ivan's bullet brought down his man. Peter's sent a horse crashing down on his rider.

The momentary confusion in the line was ended by the officer, who rode briskly to the front, waving his sword.

"Now, my merry men!" he shouted. "We have drawn their fire! Charge, and we have them!"

Not twenty paces now separated the combatants. A few more leaps of the horses, and the stronghold of the fugitives would be scaled.

But a voice came from behind the rocks:

"Don't be too sure. You may catch a Tartar."

Clark's bullet whistled through the air. Luckily for himself, the officer at that instant had his sword before his breast. The leaden messenger struck the glistening blade, and tore it from the hand that held it. It whirled through the air with such force that it finally plunged into the side of a bounding horse, bringing him in a heap to the ground.

Dropping his half-paralyzed sword-hand, the officer rode on, calling cheerily for his men to follow.

"We have them now. That is their last shot."

"Is it? I bet you a buffalo you're mistaken. You won't take warning. Take this!"

It was the voice of Clark, who in an instant sprung to the top of the boulder which had sheltered him, pistol in hand. For a moment he stood there erect, and fully revealed, a target for all the Russian muskets. His followers called to him in an agony of apprehension to come down.

But the revolver in his hand took instant, deadly aim. It cracked shrilly, and the bullet went crushing through the brain of the horse. The youth could not yet bear to have the blood of a man on his hands.

Down came the animal in a sickening crash. His rider was flung with a thud against the rocks, and lay senseless. At the same instant a storm of bullets came sweeping up the pass from the marksmen below.

But Clark had vanished as quickly as he came. His whole movement had not consumed ten seconds. The bullets rushed through empty space, as he again sought the shelter of the rocks.

"Let them have it!" he cried. "They are wavering! Let them have it!"

The reloaded rifles again rung out. Ping! Bang! Flash! Three riderless horses turned and fled. The assailed party had ceased to fire at the animals and were directing their fire against the men.

This was enough. The remainder of the troop turned and fled hastily down the pass, which they left completely choked with the bodies of dead horses, while several men lay dead or wounded on the rocky bed.

The first act of the play had ended, and the fugitives remained triumphant. They reloaded their pieces, while the soldiers withdrew out of sight down the pass.

"Well," asked Clark, "have they got enough?"

"No," answered Paul.

"But the pass is choked. We have them at our mercy."

"They will not try it on horseback again."

"How then?"

"On foot."

"Ha! By Jove, I believe you are right! But let them come as they will, foot or horse, the game is ours. So far they have not reached the worst point in the pass. Do not fire, lads, till I give the word. We can mow them down like grass."

"And by Saint Peter, we will!" declared Ivan, with set lips. "They are after our lives, and life for life is my motto. This shooting horses is played out. It is men we have to shoot now, or it is all up with us."

This fact was so evident that there was no need to repeat his words. Each of them resumed his station behind the rocks, conversing in a low tone. There was no telling when the next assault might take place, and it was necessary to be vigilant.

All below was silent, except for the occasional neigh of a horse. Fifteen minutes passed without a sign of life. Every soldier had disappeared below the turn in the pass.

But the defendants did not for an instant relax their watchfulness. A moment's heedlessness might turn the scale of victory or defeat.

Suddenly a group of men appeared in sight down the pass, rushing forward on foot at full speed. Wild shouts broke from their lips as they poured on. A constant ping of bullets struck the rocks, as if with intent to intimidate their foemen.

Yet not a sound came in response. All was as silent above as if the defenders of the rock fortress had abandoned it.

On came the forlorn hope, over fallen stones and dead horses, clambering with all haste upward. Nearer and nearer they approached. Two minutes more would place them within the fort. Yet all remained in terrible stillness.

It was the pause before the storm. The head of the assailing party had now gained the spot of which Clark had spoken. It was a point at which the ascent grew steeper and more rugged, while the pass narrowed so that scarce three men could move abreast.

When this point was reached the pushing of the throng behind jammed those in front so that one or two men fell. The critical moment had arrived.

"Fire!" came the fatal word.

A volley of bullets poured down the pass, into the dense mass of crowding men. They fell as if in winrows before the scythe of the mower. But others came pressing on upward over their bodies.

There was no time for the defenders to reload. They drew their revolvers. Again a storm of bullets struck the dense throng, at close pistol distance. Others fell. The narrow way was becoming choked up with dead bodies. The assault wavered. Again came the keen crack of the revolvers. A groan of dismay ran through the throng, who were helplessly exposed to the pistols of their assailants. The next moment they had turned and were rushing in wild panic down the fatal pass, leaving half a score of their party to choke the throat of the narrow defile.

"Have you got enough?" roared Clark, springing defiantly to the summit of the boulder.

"If not we have more of the same medicine, and can give you another dose."

The whistle of a bullet that swept the hat from his head, warned him of his imprudence. He sprung back to shelter, while the flight continued down the blood-stained pass.

CHAPTER IX

THE LAST HOPE FOR LIBERTY.

A HALF-HOUR had passed since the close of our last chapter. The silence which had reigned since the signal defeat of the storming-party was now for the first time broken. Up the pass came a group of men, bearing with them a white flag of truce.

"What are they after now?" cried Ivan savagely, grasping his rifle with a threatening clutch. "Some treacherous game, I wager."

"We will soon see," answered Clark. "I think I can venture on my lookout now without drawing a bullet."

He sprung once more to the top of the boulder, rifle in hand.

"Halt!" he cried sternly. "Tell your business before you venture another step."

A soldierly-looking man stepped forward as spokesman.

"We ask the privilege of removing our wounded," he said.

Clark turned and spoke for a minute with his companions. He then turned again to the soldiers.

"You can have the wounded if you disturb nothing else in the pass," he declared. "The dead must remain as they lie. We have built ourselves a wall of dead bodies. If you disturb it we will add your own to it. Do you assent to this?"

"Yes."

"Then come on."

He stepped down from his exposing perch, but kept a keen lookout on the movements of the Russians.

"Be ready, at the word," he warned his comrades. "They are not to be trusted."

Yet the soldiers seemed honest in their intentions. They picked up their wounded, and particularly the body of their captain, who lay still in a dead insensibility, and retired down the pass in a solemn procession.

They had hardly done so before Ivan sprung up, and struck his side with his hand in a movement of angry spite.

"The fools we were!" he cried. "We should have brought the captain in ourselves, and held him as hostage."

"At any rate he has got the fight taken out of him," answered Clark. "I doubt if he leads another charge to-day."

His words brought back a surprising echo. A bullet struck the rock at his feet, coming so close as to pierce his sleeve. The report of the rifle which had sent this shot rung from high up in the air.

"By St. Anthony!" cried Paul, "the treacherous hounds have sealed the heights and are firing at us from above!"

He pointed up the side of the pass. There, two hundred feet above their heads, a shaggy poll peered out from a crevice in the rock wall.

Another bullet came pinging down, and flattened itself at their feet.

"The dogs! They have done this under cover of their flag of truce! I suspected some treachery. To shelter, men. We are at the mercy of those rascals above there."

The overhanging boulders afforded some shelter, but the situation was a perilous one if the soldiers should charge at this moment.

"There is but one—or two at the most," declared Paul. "They must be dislodged. We are lost if they are left there. Cover the spot with your rifles, till I see if I can find a point to reach them from."

The shaggy head that looked down from the crevice hastily withdrew as three rifle-barrels were aimed at it. Paul took the opportunity to quickly retreat up the pass. Reaching the ravine through which flowed the stream he quickly began to climb up a narrow crevice along its side, that was hardly fit for the sure feet of a goat. The ravine hid his movement from the eyes of the party on the opposite side of the pass.

Several anxious minutes followed. The fellow in the rock crevice kept under cover. He was apparently waiting for something. In a few minutes there came into view the advance of a body of dismounted troopers down the pass. They stood as if waiting for a signal. It came, in the wave of a hand from the upper rock. Instantly they bounded forward, up the pass.

The defenders of the fortress were in a ticklish position. Should they seek to repel this assault they would be exposed to the fire from the rock. Should they lie under cover they were lost. With anxious hope and dread they awaited the result of Paul's adventure.

A third shot came from the concealed marksman above. It scored Peter's arm. He had for the moment inadvertently exposed himself.

"What the deuce shall we do?" groaned Clark. "In two minutes more the storming-party will be on us."

The answer came in a sharp rifle-crack, that echoed from side to side of the pass. A flash of flame shot out from the rocks above their heads. From the opposite side of the pass came a scream of pain, and the form of a man suddenly appeared, hanging by his hands from a rocky ledge, and writhing as if in agony.

For a moment he hung and swayed between earth and heaven. Then his hold loosened, and down he came bounding from rock to rock, until he was dashed in a shapeless mass on the flinty surface of the pass below.

"There is only the one!" screamed Paul. "Repel the stormers! On your lives, don't let them up the pass!"

There was no need of this warning. The falling body had struck the base rock directly in front of his charging comrades, so closely that they were sprinkled with his blood.

They checked themselves in horror, and stood gazing in dismay at this terrible spectacle. Their indecision was terminated by the rattle of rifles up the pass and the whistle of bullets past their ears. They turned and fled in terror from the fatal spot.

In a few minutes afterward, Paul joined his comrades.

"That little trick is settled," he grimly remarked.

"Isn't the whole game settled?" asked Clark. "They are cured of the game of storming our fort, I fancy. They may return to the town and report their failure."

"Not they," answered Ivan. "They would not dare report that four men had fought off a hundred. They may do one of two things. They fancy we are in a trap here, and may wait until night and storm our stronghold under cover of the darkness; or they may send back to Trobilsk for a field-piece, and batter down our defenses."

Clark turned to Paul, who stood leaning upon his rifle, his dark face marked with a saturnine frown.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"They will do neither."

"And why not?"

"They have a surer game. Within an hour this fortress will cease to protect us. We must escape, or we are lost."

"What do you mean?" cried they all in concert.

"They cannot take us in front," declared Clark.

"But they can in the rear. I discovered more than one thing, gentlemen, while I was up the rock yonder. The bird I brought down is not the only one on the wing. Far up, over the upper level of the mountain, I caught sight of a party of men. How they climbed there I don't know. There must be some pass up the rocks which I have never seen. At any rate they are there, and within an hour will be in our rear."

A look of dismay came upon all the faces present.

"What shall we do then?" asked Clark. "Shall we abandon the horses, and try the maral's track?"

Paul shook his head.

"We would be cut off if we attempted it. That is the footway by which the party above there will descend into the pass behind us."

"What remains then?"

They all looked with eager question at the guide, satisfied that there was something at work in his brain.

"Only one chance remains," he answered.

He pointed significantly at the stream, that ran in swirling foam at their feet.

A shudder ran through their hearts. It seemed like inviting certain death.

"No man can do it and live!" exclaimed Peter.

"We cannot stay here and live," answered Paul, sternly. "It is a question whether we are to die by rope or bullet, or try our luck in the torrent."

"There is no question about it," declared Clark. "We'll take to the water. A man that's got the heart to take his chances boldly don't die easily. If any of you choose to stay here well and good. I, for one, am going to dive for freedom."

"Where you go we will follow," came from Peter and Ivan.

Paul stood in quiet resolution.

"To your horses, then. Now's the time, while we have a free field. The soldiers will give us no trouble for the next hour. They have found that we can bite, and will keep clear of our teeth."

During the stirring scenes we have described the horses had been quietly browsing the scanty herbage that grew at the foot of the rocky wall. Their bridles were quickly replaced, and the riders sprung to their saddles.

Taking a last look, to see that their movements were not observed from below, they reined up on the rocky borders of the stream, and gazed in silence into the whirling flood. Here it was but some ten feet wide, but where it entered the ravine below it expanded to the width of twenty feet.

"It is shallower there," remarked Paul. "If our horses can only keep their footing we may go through safely. Let us move closely side by side, and each man take hold of his neighbor's rein. That will help us to support ourselves against the rush of the water."

This advice was judicious, and they arranged themselves accordingly, Paul and Ivan taking the two outside places.

"Now, are you ready?" asked the guide.

"All ready."

"Then march."

The horses halted, and for the moment refused to enter the water. But they were urged onward, and soon set foot in the stream. It was shallow near the bank, but soon deepened. The checked flood heaped itself up on the daring riders, until it was pouring in foam over the flanks of the horses.

On they went, step by step. Return was now impossible. The walls of the ravine closed in on them at either side. Slowly and carefully trod the well-trained steeds. The waters howled and hissed by, heaping over the saddles and threatening to bear the riders bodily away.

The torrent seemed like some great dragon, with foam for scales, furious at being disdained, and bent on the destruction of its daring foes.

On went the horses, still side by side. The rocky path, by the torrent's brink, of which Paul had spoken, was now visible at some distance in advance. If that could be reached they were safe.

But now the stream narrowed and deepened. The horses lost their footing, scrambled wildly for a moment, and then were borne helplessly away, furiously seeking to swim on the surging flood.

"Every man for himself now!" cried Paul. "It is life or death on the turn of a wave. Who gains the brink is safe! He who does not perish! Work for your lives!"

His voice was nearly drowned in the roaring and hissing of the mountain torrent that dashed onward with its prey.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE HEART OF THE TORRENT.

MORE than an hour passed by in slowly dragging seconds. Around the spot where the late bloody fight had taken place all continued silent as death. No indication of the terrible strife

remained, beyond the bleeding bodies of men and horses that lay heaped in crimson witness in the fatal pass. The stream foamed on as if in exultation over the victims which it had so recently received within its hungry jaws.

It was the dread silence after the rending storm.

But now there came a faint stir from up the pass. No one was yet visible, and it would have needed keen ears to recognize the faint rustle of garments and sound of footsteps which came from the upper levels. The sound drew nearer. Finally a face appeared at the nearest turn in the path, peering heedfully around the wall of rock.

The refuge of the fugitives was full in view from that point. The eyes of the gazer expanded as he looked, their expression changing from curiosity to surprise and utter astonishment. A few moments' observation, and he sprung hastily into the open path, calling out in a voice of loud dismay:

"By the blessed Saint Nicholas, there's no one there! There's not a soul left of the whole ship's crew of them."

His voice called several others into sight. A half-dozen men sprung out from the shelter of the rocks, rifle in hand, and all gazing in utter astoundment at the empty stronghold.

"They are in hiding somewhere. Look out for bullets. Give the signal to the men below."

A bugle call rung out on the air, as the scouts withdrew in caution to the shelter of the rocks. The call was echoed from below, and in a few minutes there came a rush of soldiers up the pass.

This time their progress was uninterrupted. No bullet sung past their ears; no voice hailed them from the fort. Over the dead and dying they clambered, and into that natural fortress which before they had sought to storm in vain.

And before them was only visible a group of their own men, who stood above, returning their stare of surprise with looks of equal wonder.

"Where are they? Did they pass you? What has become of them?"

"The saints know! They are birds, I fancy, and have flown over the precipice. Or they are fiends and have sunk into the earth. We found the place as empty as you see it now."

"Look out for them up the rocks. They must have discovered some path, and clambered over."

Several men sprung forward to examine the locality, but they were checked by the voice of the leader of the party.

"Halt!" he cried. "They have done nothing of the sort."

"Why?"

"Because their horses are gone. A horse is not a goat, to climb in a maral's pathway."

The justice of this observation was quickly apparent. The men drew back, while a new thought became prominent in their minds. What had become of the horses? That was the question now to be decided.

The point at which they had been grazing was easily perceived. But elsewhere the rock was too bare and hard to take any impression of footsteps. After a few minutes' search, however, a loud call came from a soldier who had

wandered to the spot at which the torrent again entered the ravine.

"See here!" he shouted. "Here are their tracks on the soil at the stream's edge. And leading downward to the water. By all that's risky, the bounds have trusted themselves to the stream, and gone down with the torrent!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the officer, rushing forward. "No man could venture it, and live!"

"It may be impossible; but it is true for all that."

The officer had now reached the spot, and was examining it for himself. A single glance was enough for his experienced eyes. There was no doubt that the fugitives had taken to the stream.

"But they will be dashed to pieces! There is no man or horse living that could stem that torrent. Does any one know the lower reach of this stream? How does it open out below?"

All present shook their heads. It was unknown ground.

"But those men are not fools," suggested a soldier. "They must have known what was before them. There may be a safe landing below."

"Very well. Will you follow them?"

The knowing soldier drew back. He had no heart for carrying out his own suggestion.

"There is no need of that," remarked another. "We have a surer path over the rocks. If they escape they must pass near the Cossack station beyond the mountains. The path over the summit is a shorter one than any they can take. We may give the alarm before they reach there."

"A good thought!" cried the officer. "Two of you make all haste in that direction. Two others seek to descend over the summit to the ravine. They may be still in there, or their dead bodies may be found. Hasten! there is no time to waste."

At this command the four men selected for this duty hurried away up the pass, springing over the stream at its narrowest point. The others turned sadly back to the solemn duty of gathering their dead, who remained in the ravine below, the sole evidences of the deadly combat which had recently raged in that crimsoned spot.

Leaving them to their task we must turn to another scene of our story, and follow the fugitives in their dread venture into the jaws of the mountain whirlpool.

When we left them, at the close of the last chapter, the heaving waters had just lifted the struggling horses from their footing, and were bearing them helplessly down the stream.

The animals sought to swim, but it was impossible to stem that current. They were swept like floating chips down its center channel.

"There are worse rapids below!" screamed Paul, with a voice that rung above the roar of the torrent. "And jagged rocks to close them. If we reach there it is all up with us. Try and scramble for the bank."

The horses had still kept side by side, the riders yet grasping each other's rein. This brought the horse of Paul close to the right bank. Clark rode next to him in the line.

The guide rode a powerful and sagacious

animal, who struggled with some success to gain the side of the stream. An eddy here aided his efforts. His feet struck the bottom at a shallow place. A sharp fight with the pushing stream, which sought to sweep him again from his footing, and the strong brute succeeded in stemming the current.

Paul yet firmly grasped the rein of Clark's horse, and succeeded in drawing him in to the same place of vantage. But no power could stay the other horses. The rein which Clark grasped was torn from his hand, and the two animals with their riders hurled down the relentless channel, toward the jagged rocks below.

"Steady," exclaimed Paul. "A false step now, and we will be swept away again. Hold your beast well in hand. Steady. Is he trembling?"

"Yes. Like a leaf."

"Then let us stand for a minute, till the animals gain nerve."

"I don't blame the horse. I am trembling myself," announced Clark.

"And I also. Man and horse are made of flesh and blood; not of stone.—How goes it now? Are you getting nerve again?"

"Yes. Ha! yonder go Peter and Ivan on the rocks! Poor fellows! I fear they have seen their last sun!" He shut his eyes to close out the vision of their destruction.

"Don't look at them!" screamed Paul. "You need all your courage now to save yourself. Are you ready?"

"I am. And as solid as an oak tree. Say the word."

"Then for the bank. It is sloping here, or there would be no hope."

Clutching their bridles with firm hands the horses were set in motion, their heads turned toward the bank. This showing of their flanks toward the stream gave the current a double advantage. The water surged against the side of Paul's horse like some mighty engine, pouring over the saddle, and seeking, with immense force, to thrust the animal back into the seething channel.

No simple horse could have withstood its power. But the two animals moved side by side, each lending its strength to the struggle. They touched along their flanks, and trod like two animals in one.

A step was gained. Another. The water rapidly shallowed. A third step. Now the foam only touched the stirrups of the riders. A fourth step. The fore feet of the animals were on the edge of the bank, while their flanks were still bathed in the hissing foam.

And now came a touch of the whip; a strong surge upward; a scramble up the steep bank; and in a minute the noble animals stood on the level of the path above, streaming with water, and trembling in every vein.

"Life, and safety!" cried Clark, joyfully. "And these good animals rescued from the flood. And now for the fate of our comrades."

He sprung from the saddle as he spoke, and hastened down the pathway, followed by Paul.

This escape, which we have taken so many words to describe, had passed like a flash. It was not five minutes since they had ridden into

the stream from the pass above. Yet the time occupied in reaching the solid ground had sufficed for a very different fate to overtake the other two adventurers.

Their horses, borne down the mid-channel like leaves before a gale, and shot fiercely down the rapids, were hurled with fearful force on the jagged rocks that nearly closed the channel at the foot of the descent.

No living creature would have borne that stroke and escaped. Both horses were killed by the blow, and torn with a hundred ragged wounds. But the unlucky animals had served as a shield to their riders. The latter were flung from their saddles to the upper surface of the rocks, which they desperately clutched, and lay in a half-stunned condition.

Fortunately the stream found its way through crevices between these choking rocks, and only some rivulets of foam passed over their summits. Yet there was danger that the grasp of the clinging men might give way in their partly paralyzed state, and they drop back into the seething flood below.

"Hold your level!" cried Clark, on perceiving the condition of his companions. "Grip on like grim death! Use your teeth if your fingers give out! We will have you off in a minute!"

Yet this was not so sure. The stream swirled here, and ran between the rocks and the shore in a channel six feet wide, which it filled up to the level of the bank. The rock beyond was slippery with moss and slime. The guide gave a warning cry, but it was lost on the impetuous youth, who sprung boldly across the dangerous interval.

His feet touched the slippery rock. They shot from under him on the wet moss. He fell prostrate, with half his body hanging over the flood. A foot more to the left, and nothing could have saved him.

"A miss is as good as a mile," yelled the reckless youth, as he scrambled nimbly to his feet. "It was a fool's jump, but it is sometimes a fool's jump, or none. I'm on the spot at any rate and the game is mine."

His strong hands grasped Ivan's shoulders as he spoke, and dragged him up to a safe position on the rugged rock. He next turned to Peter. And just in time. The grasp of the half-stunned fellow had given way, and he was slowly slipping back down the slimy rock. A moment more and he would have been in the flood.

Clark seized his collar with the grip of an athlete, and jerked him strongly up. He had at that instant a double strength, and lifted Peter bodily with his single hand, setting him upright on the rock.

"Safe at last!" he cried. "And now, my men, get back your breath and your brains, and we will make tracks from these damp quarters. It is not the safest spot in Siberia."

Ten minutes passed ere the stunned men were fully themselves again. Then Clark led them to the edge of the rock, and with Paul's help got them safely across the perilous channel. A single bold leap then landed him beside them on the stony bank.

"All hunky yet?" he yelled, with a boy's enthusiasm. "And now, my lads, another break

for liberty. We are not out of the frying-pan yet, if we have escaped the fire."

CHAPTER XI.

ACROSS THE DESERT OF TARTARY.

AT the southern foot of the mountain chain which we have recently described, or rather, some five or six miles distant from it, stood a group of habitations. They were almost the only visible object in the midst of a vast plain that stretched out on every side to the distant horizon.

On the mountain flank which overlooked this scene stood a group of men, who were gazing with interest and admiration upon the scene before them. They were composed of our four adventurous friends, who had come thus far in their flight, through the perilous channels of the mountains. Two of them, Peter and Ivan, were on horseback. They had not escaped the rocks without some ugly scratches, and their two sound companions had abandoned the horses to them, making their own way on foot.

An exclamation of astonishment came from Clark, as he gazed upon the mighty level before him. Paul looked at him with a quiet smile.

"Looks grand, does it not?" he asked. "If you could only see it all you would say that your Western prairies are but cattle-fields to it. That is the great Tartar steppe, the mightiest level on the face of the earth. In the direction in which you are looking it stretches out for a thousand miles. But east and west it is four thousand miles long, and spreads from the Pacific on the east almost to the Atlantic on the west."

"And is it all desert?"

"Oh, no! It has its broad reaches of sand, which it would take the swiftest horse two days to cross at a gallop. It has its mountain-chains, more rugged than the one we have just crossed. And it has its lakes, its rivers, and its pasture-fields, on which feed millions of cattle and sheep and horses. It has its inhabitants, the savage Mongols and the wild Kirghis, with whom we may have trouble enough before we reach safe quarters. From that plain came the Tartar hordes of the great Jengbiz Khan, and of Tamerlane, who once conquered all Asia and half of Europe, and who slaughtered millions of men as we would slaughter ants. Oh, it is a great plain, and has had a great history."

The guide grew quite enthusiastic in his description of this mighty upland plain, which has indeed been the foster-home of all the civilized nations of Europe, as well as of the savage tribes whose career the guide described.

But it was not the moment for moralizing. The Russians were probably yet upon their track, and every second was valuable.

"What is the settlement below there?" asked Clark, pointing to the cluster of habitations on the plain.

"It is a Cossack station, the first of the stations through which the Russians govern the wild tribes."

"Then that is our goal. Hurry onward. Every minute counts!"

They put themselves again in motion and

rapidly descended the mountain toward the level below.

A journey of an hour and a half brought them to the vicinity of the Cossack station. It was one of a line of pickets that stretched far across the plain, fifteen miles apart, for the purpose of guarding the wild nomads of the desert.

"What shall we do?" asked Ivan. "They may have gotten the alarm of our escape. Are we not venturing blindly into danger?"

"Whether or no we must take the risk," answered Clark, boldly. "We must have food and ammunition; and we cannot cross the plain on two horses. A relay is absolutely necessary."

"But how are we to get it? The Cossacks may refuse."

"Trust me for that," answered Clark, mysteriously. "I promise you a remount of horses, and a Cossack escort as well. There are ways of doing things."

Ivan looked at him in surprise, but Peter had the utmost faith in his young master.

"If Mr. Clark says it, he'll do it," cried Peter, confidently. "I don't know how. But what he says he does."

"An escort may be useful," remarked Paul. "We may meet some of the desert robbers. As for the picket, it has not been warned yet. But we have not many minutes to lose."

"How do you know that?"

The guide turned and pointed back toward the hills. Clark looked in the direction indicated. He could perceive nothing but rock and plain.

"I see nothing doubtful," he said.

"Look yonder, below the long slope to the left."

The young man looked again. He made out some faint dots on the brown surface that seemed moving.

"It is two men," remarked Paul, quietly. "They are on our track, sent out to warn the post. But we have a half-hour the start. Will that be enough to save us?"

"Yes," answered Clark, confidently. "Push on!"

Ten minutes more brought them into the station. It consisted of two or three wooden huts, built on the open plain. Around these was a group of some twenty soldiers—bold, fierce-looking fellows, dressed in the Cossack uniform. On the level ground, grazing on the stunted-grass, was visible a number of shaggy horses, short of stature, but evidently hardy.

The soldiers looked with eager curiosity at the approaching travelers. Any break to their monotonous life was welcome. Their officer, who bore the stripes of a sergeant, stepped forward. Clark advanced to meet him.

After a few words of greeting and welcome had passed the youth remarked in an open, confident way:

"We have lost two of our horses in the mountains. The poor brutes are food for the wolves at this moment. Can you give us a relay?"

"That depends," answered the officer coolly. "I must first see your credentials, and know who you are and where you are going."

"Certainly. That is all right," rejoined

Clark easily. His three companions were listening, with nervous uneasiness, to this colloquy. Every minute now was golden.

"I am straight through from St. Petersburg," he continued, "in hot chase of a defaulter who has been tracked this far across Siberia. He passed through Trobilk only a few days ago. There is reason to believe that he came in this direction."

"Can you describe him?" asked the officer curiously.

"He was in disguise when last seen. He had red hair and whiskers, wore a short velveteen coat, and—"

"That is enough. No such person has passed this post."

"Then some one has passed?"

"Yes. Two days ago."

"Will you describe him?"

"This man had black hair and no beard. He spoke but a few words of Russian, and seemed to be English. He was dressed in fur cloak and Tartar hat."

"Short and stout?" asked Paul. "With sharp nose and thin lips, and a cunning look about the eyes?"

"Yes," answered the officer with interest.

"He had two companions? One of them a tall, spare fellow, dressed in a khalat?"

"Just so."

"It was our man," cried Clark eagerly. "Two days gone, you say? To the south?"

"Exactly."

"Then I must follow, without a moment's delay. Please order some of your men to saddle beasts for us at once. And I want a couple of Cossacks as an escort."

The sergeant looked quietly at him.

"I must see your passport, and your authority to give these orders first."

Ivan and Peter were looking anxiously back over the plain. The two pursuing scouts were now plainly visible, little more than a mile distant. The situation was growing ticklish.

"I have no time to waste," answered Clark, haughtily. "Give the order. I want the relay ready by the time you have examined my authority."

The sergeant looked at him indecisively for a moment, and then turned and spoke to his men. Several of them hurried out on the plain toward the grazing horses.

"Here is the document," continued Clark, drawing the parchment roll from his pocket. "I fancy you will find I speak from the card."

The sergeant's face changed as he ran his eyes over the important instrument. A look of respect replaced his former doubtful expression.

"A member of the British Embassy!" he muttered.

"Just so; and with power to command assistance from any post in his majesty's service, as you will perceive."

The sergeant read quickly on. He then closed the document and returned it, with a bow of great respect.

"You are correct," he said. "I am at your service."

"Then please stir up those lagging fellows,"

answered Clark, haughtily. "I must make two or three posts more before night. And order some of your fellows to get ready as an escort."

The sergeant hurried forward and gave some quick orders to his men, which produced a marked change in their movements. In a very short time six horses were brought in, bridled and saddled, and two of the Cossacks were ready for the road.

Peter could not resist the inclination to look back over the plain. The two scouts were now little over a half-mile distant. Ten minutes more would bring them into the picket. Paul gave the incautious fellow a pinch that almost brought a howl from his lips.

"You stupid fool!" he whispered savagely. "Do you want to call attention to those chaps? Find something better to look at."

Peter hastened forward at this admonition toward the horses, which were now ready. In a moment more the party were in their saddles, the two Cossacks on the flanks, with their long spears reaching far above their heads. The others carried their rifles strapped on their backs.

"Stop a few minutes," said the officer; "here come some men across the plain. They are making signs as if they had some business with you. Stop and see what they want."

"They can have no business with us," answered Clark, decisively. "Our business lies ahead, not behind. Good-by; every minute counts when one is on a trail. Away is the word, gentlemen; and let no grass grow under your feet."

Off they went, over the hard surface of the steppe. Their horses were fresh, strong and vigorous—the best of those at the station. The wiry animals rushed on at a rapid pace, over a surface as level and smooth as that of a race-course.

The Cossack escort rode with all the wild enthusiasm of the rest of the party, seemingly glad to escape from the dull life of the station.

They did not know, indeed, the cause for congratulation which their companions had in the springy gait of their horses, and in their rapid flight over the plain.

Clark looked cautiously back. The two scouts were close to the picket, running at full speed, and making frantic signs at every step.

"This is life, my merry men!" he shouted. "Ahead! ahead! is the word. And a fig take all behind. On! on! through the free air of the desert!"

The horses seemed to catch the fire of his words, and strode forward at a pace that would have done credit to a race-course.

The Cossacks, a wild-looking pair, waved their long lances with enthusiastic cries, and spurred their horses to a racing speed. Away they rushed, like birds of the desert, in all the wild gladness of flight.

At almost the same moment the two scouts rushed into the picket station, dusky and perspiring, and gasping with their exertions until they were unable to speak.

"What ails you?" demanded the sergeant. "What are you after? Are you pursued?"

The gasping fellows made ineffectual efforts

to answer. It was several minutes before they could speak in intelligible accents.

"Fools!—villains!—traitors!" came in successive gasps. "You have let them escape—you will be sent to the mines—for this."

"What do you mean? Are you crazy?" asked the sergeant, shaking one of them violently.

"Those men—they are refugees, murderers, escaped convicts!"

He pointed onward desperately to the receding party of horsemen.

"Those men?" asked the astounded sergeant.

"Yes. Don't you know our uniform? We are of the Third Regiment, stationed at Trobilsk. We chased them into the mountains. They made a stand, and left ten of us dead in the pass. They made their escape. We were sent to spread the alarm."

"But the leader had the emperor's passport. He is of the British legation."

"It is false. He is a Yankee reprobate. He stole the passport. They must be overtaken, or it will go hard with you."

The alarmed officer sprung hastily away, and gave hurried orders to his men. In a few minutes afterward the party on the plain saw a troop of horsemen leave the station, hot upon their track.

The Cossack escort were among the first to perceive this. They looked at their companions with a momentary doubt.

"What does this mean? Are we pursued?" they asked. "Let us slack up, and see if we are wanted."

"It's another escort for those two men we saw on the plain," remarked Clark. "My business is ahead, not behind. I have no seconds to spare. Push onward, lads. Let no man draw rein."

On they went with unchecked speed, the Cossacks apparently satisfied with this dubious explanation.

Two miles behind them came on the party of pursuit, pushing their horses to their utmost speed.

CHAPTER XII.

A HOT CHASE BY DAY AND NIGHT.

MILE after mile fell behind the swift steeds of the horses. There was something exhilarating in the wild ride. Above them was the broad blue sky, without a cloud on its whole extent. Beneath them was the level plain, stretching onward, as they knew, for thousands of miles. Not a tree was anywhere in sight, not a bird, nothing living but themselves on that vast out-reach of nature.

Yes, there was something else. Behind them came on their pursuers. But the latter had been falling steadily behind. Their two miles of distance had now extended to three. Fortunately the sergeant had selected the best horses at his station for the fugitives. Though they had run at top-speed for ten miles they showed no signs of distress. The horses of the steppes are celebrated for bottom rather than speed. One of them could run down two European horses.

Five miles more and they dashed into another Cossack picket. The hard driven horses were now showing some signs of distress.

"A relay. Quick!" cried Clark. "Shift our saddles at once to your best horses. We are on Government service, and have not a moment to lose."

He produced his passport as he spoke, and handed it to the officer in command.

"Give your orders first, and read afterward," he demanded. "We are in pursuit of a fugitive, and every second counts."

The presence of a Cossack escort convinced the officer of the truth of the traveler's words. He gave the necessary orders to his subordinates ere opening the passport. A glance at it was sufficient. He closed the paper and respectfully returned it.

While the horses were preparing Clark questioned concerning Mason, the fugitive thief. He learned that he had passed the station two days before.

"On, my merry men!" cried the American, springing to his saddle. "We are on the track yet."

"What troop is that behind you?" asked the officer, pointing back to the party of pursuers, who had advanced during this colloquy until they were but a mile distant.

"Some other travelers, I suppose. They must report for themselves. On, lads, our game is close ahead."

Away again, over the interminable plain, the Cossack escort still riding unsuspiciously on the flanks of the troop.

By the time that the pursuers had changed horses and were again on the trail, the fugitives were once more three miles in advance.

It was a stroke of genius which Clark had devised. He had made of his direst enemies his best friends. The magic of the passport secured him the best horses at each station. By his side rode two men as guards, who would have turned spear and carbine against him had they dreamed of the truth. In the rear came a party of eager pursuers, spreading fury and dismay at every station which they reached. And so the chase went on, sunshine ahead, storm behind.

By the fortune of picking up the best horses at every station the distance between pursued and pursuers gradually increased, until at sun-down the latter were six or seven miles in the rear.

Since morning the fugitives had ridden nearly a hundred miles. They were now far within the steppe.

"Lucky the Russians have not stretched a telegraph wire between their stations," whispered Clark to Ivan. "They would soon discount our daring game if they had the lightning to chase us."

One of the Cossack escort now rode up to Clark.

"Shall we stop at this next station for the night?" he asked.

"No. Night and day is my motto. We must ride at least a station or two more before we draw rein. Is the road safe in the night?"

"We may be attacked by the desert brigands."

"Let them. We will give them a lesson."

"Shall we stop, then, for supper?"

"Supper can wait till our ride is ended. If

you are hungry take a bite in your fist. When I am on the chase, my good fellow, there are no halts."

The Cossack withdrew, a little discontented, yet with renewed respect for the young traveler whom he was escorting. It was nearly night-fall when they entered the next station. The change of horses was quickly made, and they were soon on the road again. The usual questions about Mason had been asked, with the usual answers. He was two days' journey in advance.

They had not got far from the station, however, when the Cossack who had lately spoken to Clark again approached him.

"I learned something of importance at the picket," he said, "which may change your plans. Mason, or whatever you call the man you are after, did not ride to the next station. He diverged from the post-track a short distance ahead of us."

"Ha!" exclaimed Clark, with sudden interest. "That is news indeed. How do you know this?"

"I was told it by a soldier at the picket who rode for a distance with the party."

"But where, then, did he go, and how shall we take up the trail?"

"He rode out to a Kirghis encampment, which lays off here somewhere to the right."

"The Kirghis, eh?" exclaimed Clark. "Then we are in their country?"

"Yes. Sultan Souk, of the Middle Horde, is pasturing somewhere to the west of us."

"Can you lead the way to his camp?"

"It is doubtful if we can find it after dark. We can try it. But it would be safer if we want to escape a cold bed on the desert, to turn back to the picket, and ride on to-morrow."

"Turn back? Never. Push on. We will find the Kirghis. I feel it in my bones."

The Cossack bowed, but made no answer. He rode ahead, diverging toward the west. The others followed. In a few words Clark explained to his followers the change of plan.

"And it is a lucky change," he remarked, in cautious tones. "We have cut loose from those dangerous Russian pickets, and we have left no word behind to reveal our change of plans. Once safely among the nomads of the plain, and we can snap our fingers at the Russians."

On they rode, all glad at this change of plan, though they had to conceal their exultation from the Cossack escort. The night fell rapidly. Ere they were a mile away from the point of divergence darkness covered the plain.

It was a moonless night, yet the stars were visible. These served as guides, and their Cossack leader rode fearlessly onward through the gloom, closely followed by his train.

Mile after mile they went on thus, heading due westward over the endless plain. Not a landmark was anywhere visible. Nowhere a trace of the shepherd-tribe appeared.

For some twenty miles their ride continued, yet not a sign of any encampment was visible. The guide drew back anxiously.

"I fear we have passed it in the darkness," he said. "A camp on these plains is like a boat on a lake. It is not easy found in the dark."

The other Cossack drew up his horse sud-

denly, and sprung to the ground, which he felt with his hands.

"There is good grass here," he announced. "We are near the pastures."

The horses, too, grew more lively, and started ahead with renewed speed.

"They scent water," remarked Paul. "We are approaching a stream."

"Good news," exclaimed the Cossack, joyfully. "For there comes a cloud over the sky. In ten minutes every star will be blotted out, and our only compass gone."

"That is the best piece of news yet," whispered Paul to Clark.

"Why?"

"I have been afraid the Russians would pursue us to the Kirghis camp. But they cannot do it without the stars to guide them. We are safe for the night."

"And we can laugh at them to-morrow."

Paul's prediction proved right. Within five minutes a stream was reached, into which the thirsty animals rushed, and began eagerly to drink.

While they were drinking the two Cossacks alighted, and searched the muddy borders of the brook with their hands for the footprints of animals. Nothing was found, however, and they separated, one going up and one down the stream, on the same errand.

The travelers waited impatiently the result of this investigation. In a few minutes there came a loud call from the man who had taken the northward direction. All hurried up to the spot, and found that he had discovered a well-marked track, in which the hoof-marks of both cattle and horses could be traced by the hands.

Fording the shallow brook, they rode on in search of the *aoul*, or Kirghis camp. After proceeding half a mile there came to their ears what seemed the distant barking of a dog. They continued their course, anxiously listening. Ere they had gone much further the voices of several dogs broke on the silence, the barking soon growing furious as they advanced.

"Halt here!" cried the Cossack leader. "We are near the camp. We must look out that we are not assailed as brigands."

Now the clatter of hoofs was heard, in proof that the guards were riding to call out the tribe. Soon a great noise resounded. The barking of the dogs was succeeded by the shouts of men, and by the sound of galloping horses, as the armed and alert nomads rode out ready for the fray.

The two Cossacks pushed forward toward the sentinels at a slow pace, calling out that they were friends and not robbers. In a few minutes they reached the watchmen, whose fear vanished when they recognized them as Russians.

The guards now came forward and conducted the party of travelers to the chief, who stood waiting to receive them.

It was a strange scene they gazed upon. Around the venerable chief was collected a group of armed horsemen, all grasping their battle-axes, and ready for the fray. Behind them huddled the women and children, all anxious and frightened. Around rose the bee-hive *yourts*, or tents of the nomad Tartars. From a

distance bleated the herds. All this, under the faint light that came from the *yourts*, formed a remarkable scene of barbarian Asiatic life, on which Clark looked with eyes of wonder.

In a few minutes, however, the travelers were conducted to an empty *yourt*, all the inhabitants of the camp sought their tents again, and silence and sleep fell upon the scene. It was one of those events that are of frequent occurrence in a nomad camp, which are always subject to the attacks of the robber-bands of the steppes, and are always ready for the combat.

CHAPTER XII. FROM PASTURE TO PASTURE ACROSS THE DESERT.

THE scene on which the travelers gazed the next morning was full of interest and animation. Around them extended the *yourts* of the Kirghis, the Tartars of the Steppes, bee-hive-shaped mansions, covered with great strips of felted cloth, made of camel's hair, and spread over a framework of poles. It formed a warm, close habitation, yet so fragile that it could be taken to pieces and packed on the back of a camel in an hour's time.

Looking at the travelers with equal interest was a group of the people, short, squat, stout fellows, the most of them with bowed legs, from living so much on horseback. They were of the olive complexion, and had the almond eyes of the Asiatics, while their faces were almost destitute of beards.

Both men and women were dressed alike, in long cotton khalats, or gowns, encircled by a belt or a shawl at the waist, and usually so dirty that it was impossible to tell what their original color had been.

But Clark was most interested in the animals which surrounded the village. These consisted of immense herds of horses, cattle, sheep, goats and camels, which covered the whole plain. Of these animals the nomads possess vast numbers, and it is not uncommon to see a single herd containing 1,000 camels, 10,000 horses, 20,000 cattle, and 50,000 sheep.

Early as the hour was the women had been already out, milking their herds, and were carrying back the milk in large leathern pails. This milk was poured into large caldrons, under which a hot fire was blazing. A group of old women, who looked like witches in their tattered clothes, kept busy stirring the milk, which becomes thick after boiling for two hours. It is then cut into squares and dried in the sun, as winter food for the people.

Sultan Souk, a handsome, determined-looking man, greeted the travelers, and invited them to breakfast in his *yourt*. They gladly accepted, as they had not tasted food for twenty-four hours.

"I don't know how you will relish a Kirghis breakfast," said Paul to Clark, as they followed their host. "These folks don't live in a very civilized fashion."

"Oh! when a chap is as hungry as I am they can eat beef cooked and served in any fashion," answered Clark. "I am past being particular."

"Beef?" laughed Paul. "I pity all the beef you will get."

"What then?"

"You are in a new part of the world, Mr. Cloverly, and among new notions. These people think that beef is hardly fit for dogs to eat."

"On what do they live then?"

"Mostly on mutton. But when they want a grand feast they kill a horse. When you find horse meat on their tables you may know that you are feasting like a king."

Clark followed the sultan, as the nomad chief was called, a little astonished to find himself among people who despised beef, and preferred horse meat to any other viand.

He was rather pleased on this occasion to find that the breakfast consisted of boiled mutton, which was served up on a wooden tray, with boiled rice. The remainder of the breakfast consisted of dried apricots and raisins, and brick tea.

This brick tea, which the nomads drink in great quantities, is made from the refuse of the tea crop. It is mixed with bullock's blood, and pressed into a solid mass, of the shape of a brick, and so hard that it has to be cut with an ax. This stuff is boiled with sour cream, salt, and meal, and is more like tea soup than tea. Yet the Kirghis drink it steaming hot, and in great quantities, sometimes as many as twenty bowls per day.

The table around which our travelers now squatted, there being no such luxury as chairs, was empty of all the appliances of civilization. There were no plates, knives or forks, and the strangers curiously observed their hosts, anxious to see how they would manage to consume their food.

But Sultan Souk soon gave them to understand that fingers were made before forks. Sizing a large piece of mutton with one hand, he drew a knife from his belt with the other. He crammed the meat into his mouth until his jaws were full, and then cut off the huge mouthful with his knife, so close to his lips that it looked as if he would take them off in the process. This done he chewed away diligently at the food, holding the joint in his hand in readiness to repeat the dose.

This was hint enough for the travelers. When you are in Rome do as Rome does, is an old proverb, and they at once put it in practice. But they could not easily bring themselves to the completion of the process, for when the sultan was satisfied with his meal, he handed the half-chewed joint to the women of the family, who were anxiously waiting behind the table for their share of the feast.

Clark rose after a few minutes in disgust. Hungry as he was he could not easily break himself into the barbarian fashion. He strolled out into the aoul, in which the process of boiling the morning's milk was still busily going on.

In fact he was growing eager to proceed. There was no telling how soon the Russians might be on the track, and a wasted hour might bring trouble.

He had another reason for haste. He had learned from the sultan that Mason, the fugitive, had really been at his camp, which he had left but thirty hours before, riding in search of

a tribe who had their pastures in a valley about fifty miles to the west.

"Then I must make all haste," cried Clark. "It will be a day's ride, without a change of horses, to cross that space, and we must reach the tribe before night."

"You can easily do it, with Kirghis horses and Kirghis guides, which you must take," said the hospitable chief. "It is a dangerous piece of country you have to cross, infested with daring robbers, and your party is too small to take the risk."

"Many thanks for your kindness," answered Clark, through the aid of one of the Cossacks, who served for interpreter. "I shall be glad to accept your offer."

The sultan was as good as his word. In a short time a troop of horses was caught, bridled, and brought up to the yours. They were wild, savage creatures, hard to control, and full of the spirit and wildness of their desert plain.

The one saddled for Clark was a coal-black stallion, with an eye full of fire, who pawed the ground in a rage as he awaited his rider. It was no easy matter to control him, and he plunged forward with a bound like a deer, as soon as he felt the weight of a rider in his saddle.

There was no turning him back, and the youth rode on, leaving it to the others to overtake him. There was something exhilarating in the furious speed, in the smooth gallop of the fiery steed, and the fresh, pure air of the open plain. He soon gave up the effort to check the fiery beast, and let him run on at full speed, knowing that eight or ten miles of such a gallop would bring him down to a soberer pace.

He soon left the pastures behind and reached the open plain, covered here with sand and gravel, which was as smooth and hard as a floor. The youth, though not a trained rider, sat his horse like a centaur, to the admiration of the Kirghis, who live on horseback, and have almost forgotten how to walk.

He was ten miles out ere they overtook him. By that time the horse had lost much of its fiery energy, and settled down to a slower pace, better suited for the long journey which yet lay before the traveler.

Clark found that his party had been increased by eight Kirghis horsemen. These were hardy, savage-looking fellows, dressed in leathern coats, with the mane of a horse flowing down their backs. Each carried a long spear, with a tuft of horse-hair at its extremity. A long-handled battle-ax, thrust in the belt at the waist, completed their equipment, and marked them as men whom it would not be safe to trifle with.

With a brief greeting, and a laugh at his runaway, Clark joined his friends, and resumed the journey across the steppe. For mile after mile they rode onward, over a scene as monotonous as the open sea. An uninterrupted level of sand and gravel; now running into long undulations, now as level as the floor, and seemingly without end, while not a sign of life marked its vast extent. But the sky was clear. The air was pure and bracing. There was a sense

of freedom and breadth in the scene, that for the time made Clark envy the shepherds who spent their days in this life-giving air, and who lived upon these wild-springing, spirited horses of the steppes.

Hour after hour passed by and still they rode onward, at a steady pace. To the far south was visible a blue line that looked like a mountain range, and a gleam as of a flowing stream. But where they were all was the barest desert.

The sun was sinking low in the west, and yet no trace of the expected pastures was visible. Clark questioned one of the Kirghis.

"In an hour," was the answer, "we will be in the yours. See yonder."

Clark looked in the direction of his pointing hand. He beheld a group of small, gracefully-shaped animals, which were bounding forward at a great speed, and so lightly that they hardly seemed to touch the ground.

"They are the antelopes of the steppe," explained the Kirghis. "They are not far away from grass and water. We will be in St. Sultan Beck's aoul before the sun touches the western edge."

"But what ails the creatures? They have suddenly changed their course."

The Kirghis replied by a hasty movement, in which he drew his battle-ax from his belt, and turned his horse more to the southwest.

"Look yonder," he said, pointing northward. "The desert robbers. Make ready. We may have to fight our way."

The objects at which he pointed were yet far off, but were evidently horsemen. They came on at a great pace. In a half-hour after their discovery they were within easy vision. It was a troop of Kirghis horsemen, some thirty or forty in all, who rode in battle array with brandished spears and axes.

"Make ready!" commanded Clark, as he took his rifle from his back and examined the lock. "We will not fly from the beggars. They outnumber us, but they are not used to powder and ball. We will give them a touch of our quality."

The strange band came on at great speed. The travelers had halted, and were quietly awaiting them.

"Give them a touch of your quality!" cried Clark to Paul.

The guide quickly raised his rifle to his eye, but ere he could fire, the barrel was struck upward by the hand of the nearest Kirghis.

"No—no!" he exclaimed. "They are not robbers after all. It is Sultan Beck and his men. Don't fire!"

The opposite troops had now halted, on perceiving Europeans among the travelers. They sent forward two of their number, who were met by two of Sultan Souk's Kirghis. In a minute explanations had been given. Each party had mistaken the other for a robber band. A mingling of the troops followed, and Clark soon grasped the hand of the tall, stalwart leader of the Kirghis troop—the very model of a desert chief.

In a half-hour afterward they were among green pastures, and riding through the vast herds of Sultan Beck, that spread for miles over the plains.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE CHASE.

WE cannot here detail all the incidents of the chase of the fugitive thief across the steppes. It continued for day after day, each day bringing them nearer to their goal. Like them, the fugitive was riding from pasture to pasture of the Kirghis, but not with their speed, as he has no idea of any close pursuit.

It was evening of the third day after leaving Sultan Souk's aoul. The travelers that day had crossed a long reach of desert. Nightfall found them on the reedy shores of a small lake beyond which a range of hills appeared.

They knew that there was an encampment somewhere in this vicinity, but no trace of it could be seen. The guides led around the northern border of the lake, eagerly examining the ground for some trace of horsemen or herds.

These nomads have all the keenness of the American Indians in detecting a trail; but, sharply as they looked, nothing was visible.

Finally, one of them observed a faint stir in the reeds. Riding thither he discovered two Kirghis, who had been hiding from the strangers.

A few words reassured them, and they willingly led the way, by a path through the reeds, toward the pastures of their tribe.

"You are not our only strange visitors," said one of them. "We have another European in our yours, who came at noon to-day."

This remark was translated to Clark, who waved his hat with a gesture of triumph.

"Mason, by all that's good!" he shouted. "We have him nailed at last! Ask that good fellow to describe the visitor."

The description given doubled Clark's satisfaction. There was no mistake possible. It was the man he sought beyond a doubt. He fell into a reverie as they rode on, debating to himself as to how he had best act in the emergency.

"You take the post of leader of the party," he at length said to Ivan. "I will keep in the background. You can enter into a conversation with this man. Tell him what you please of our business, and get his own story of his plans. I will question his attendants. I want to find, if possible, what he has done with the spoil."

This plan was hardly arranged when they rode into the aoul of the tribe. Its chief, a stout, intelligent-looking person, advanced to meet Ivan, who put himself forward as the leader of the party.

By the side of the Kirghis chief stood a brown-faced fellow, short and slender, with a countenance that might have been recognized in any part of the earth as that of an Englishman of the lower classes.

Clark, who stood in the background, affecting to busy himself about his horse, fixed his keen glance for an instant on the face of the sultan's guest. That one look was enough. There was no mistaking the face of Thomas Mason, his father's thievish servant.

The shrewd youth continued to keep out of sight, while words of greeting passed between Ivan and his Kirghis host. They walked away at length, in company with Mason, and disappeared in the sultan's yourt.

Clark now hastened to the Cossack interpreter. "That is my man," he briefly declared. "Find

out all the Kirghis know about him. See who is with him."

A few minutes sufficed to acquire the information. Two Russian servants had accompanied Mason across the desert, together with a guard, from the last tribe they had passed.

These Russians were somewhere on the left of the encampment, looking at the Kirghis cattle. Clark sent forward Paul, the guide, to question them, while he anxiously awaited the result.

A half-hour passed ere the scout returned. The look of his face showed that he had gained some desirable information.

"What is in the wind?" asked Clark quickly. "Have you learned anything?"

"Yes," was the answer. "The fact is these men are more in the dark than we. They tell me that they are traveling with a German gentleman, Carl Kinnig by name, a man of wealth, who is journeying for scientific pursuits. He has little baggage with him, and keeps all his valuables safely out of sight. They know, in fact, very little more than that he pays them well for their services."

"Did you ask them how it was that his hair had so suddenly changed from red to brown?"

"No. That would have been to let them into our game."

"You may do so, if you wish. And take the Cossacks with you. Tell these fellows that they are confederates of a thief, and are our prisoners. I want to detach Mason from all aid. I will call on that gentleman and let him know what's in the wind. There is no need to mince matters longer."

Clark made his way toward the yourt of the chief, at the door of which he paused awhile before entering.

Meanwhile a conversation had been proceeding inside between Ivan and the false German, whose Russian dialect, however, was very broken and disjointed.

So far as Ivan could understand him, he was a rich German gentleman, who had set out on a journey for scientific purposes, and was now making his way toward the Caspian sea.

He told a long story of his travels, to which Ivan responded by as long a story, both being pure works of the imagination.

"From what part of Germany are you?" asked Ivan, at length.

"From Baden."

"Ah! But is not your German dialect an unusual one? It sounds to me like that of some Englishmen I have met."

Mason gave a slight start at this remark.

"The deuce!" he muttered, in very good English. "This fellow knows too much. German and English are languages very much alike," he exclaimed, in his broken Russian. "They might be easily confused together."

"But the German is very rough and rugged like. It doesn't sound as glib as the English. I have met people of both nations in St. Petersburg."

"Hang the fool!" grumbled Mason, in his native tongue. "Is he intending to stick to that? If my speech is going to sell me, I had best take up the English dodge. He will next be smelling out the plunder in my pocket. I must pull the wool over this fellow's eyes."

The Kirghis chief at this moment left the tent, after a useless effort to understand the conversation of his guests. He was joined by Clark, who beckoned to his side the Cossack interpreter. A few minutes sufficed to acquaint the shrewd nomad with the true state of the case, and the fact that he was harboring a thief as his guest, threw him into a furious rage.

He angrily returned to the yourt, in company with his new guest. The conversation had continued between Ivan and Mason, whose face wore a look of satisfaction. He had reason to think that he had deceived his questioner.

"The fellow is confoundedly inquisitive, though," he muttered in English. "He pushed me close. If he only knew now that I am from London instead of Baden, and that my true name is—"

"Thomas Mason," supplied a stern voice behind him.

The fellow sprung as if he had been shot, while his face grew suddenly of a ghastly pallor. He turned round, trembling in every limb.

Before him stood, beside the fierce-faced Kirghis chief, a graceful figure, whose fresh young face seemed to give the detected fugitive an attack of palsy.

"Clark Cloverly!" he ejaculated, looking as if he would fall.

"Just so, Mason," exclaimed Clark. "You played your part well, my man, but you had a sharp bound on your track. I have chased you now for three thousand miles, and I will not leave you till you deliver every particle of the valuables which you stole from my father."

"It is false," stammered the thief. "I have nothing of his."

"Have you not? We will see that, if we have to skin you to come at it. You just now acknowledged that you had the plunder in your pocket."

"It is a lie! I refuse to be searched."

"Then I am a liar, am I?" cried Clark angrily, seizing him by the shoulder, and furiously shaking him. "We will soon prove who is the liar."

He turned and spoke to Ivan, who quickly disappeared. In a minute he returned, bringing with him all the Russians in the camp, including Mason's two servants.

The prisoner appealed to them to protect him, and they ranged themselves by his side, casting furious looks at the opposing party.

"That is right, my good fellows," said Clark approvingly. "But you hardly know the sort of man you are backing. Can you read?"

"Yes," answered one of the men.

"Then cast your eyes over this document."

He handed the man a partly printed and partly written paper, which he quickly perused, with a sudden change of countenance.

"It is a warrant, issued from a St. Petersburg court, to arrest and search Thomas Mason, a runaway thief," declared the man.

"Just so. And there stands Mason before you. You can see it confessed in his face." He handed the warrant to the Cossack interpreter. "Explain this to the sultan," he commanded.

A few minutes sufficed to make the Kirghis chief acquainted with the meaning of the docu-

ment, at which he gazed with deep respect, as at some magic scroll.

"Now, Mason," continued Clark severely, "you are at the end of your rope. Either quietly deliver up your plunder, or I will have you stripped to the skin in the presence of these persons, and relieved of all your ill-gotten wealth."

The unhappy villain looked appealingly from face to face of those present. But he encountered only stern and unfriendly faces. Even his own servants confronted him with distrust and scorn.

The game was up, and he saw it. With slow movements, each of which looked like the pulling of a tooth, he removed a part of his clothing, and unbuckled a belt from his waist.

"You will not leave me alone among these Kirghis?" he asked Clark with humble appeal. "I will give all up to you if you promise to protect me. They would sell me as a slave to the terrible Tartars of the South."

Clark made no answer until he had emptied the treasure-belt of its contents, and closely examined them. They consisted principally of papers, financial securities of great value. There was, however, a considerable sum in Russian bank notes, and some gold and silver coin.

It is all here, except some five hundred roubles, which you have got rid of in your vain effort to escape," he announced. "You did not know the men you were dealing with, my chap, nor that a Yankee boy had the eyes and nose of a sleuth-hound. I would have run you down if I had had to chase you ten thousand miles further. As you have made a free deliverance, however, I will not leave you to be sold into slavery. You can accompany me back to Russia, and there shift for yourself."

"Thanks, thanks," muttered the detected villain, with some return of color to his pallid face. He knew well the terrors of slavery among the brutal Tartars.

This scene had been of great interest to the Kirghis chief, to whom Clark now explained, through the interpreter, what had happened. In return the Sultan congratulated him on his success, and begged him to remain as his guest for a few days.

But the shrewd American lad did not forget the fact that there was a chase after him as sharp as that he had made after the thief, and that a Russian troop might soon appear at the aoul, with authority to carry him back to a Siberian dungeon. He therefore quietly thanked the chief, but declared that he could only spend the night with him, as he must resume his journey with the early day.

The next morning, therefore, Clark dismissed his Cossack escort, with a gratuity that made the two fellows happy, and sent them back to find out how thoroughly they and their friends had been hoodwinked by the daring youth.

The remainder of the party, with Mason and his two late servants, rode onward in a rapid journey over the steppes toward the borders of Europe, two thousand miles away.

It is not our purpose here to detail the adventures which befell the travelers in this long and arduous journey. It will suffice to say that, after all they were forced to winter in the steppes, and that they finally reached Europe without Mason, who left the party in a manner which we have not space here to describe.

Clark and his party did not tarry long in Russia, but hurried on to Switzerland, the home of the political refugee, where Clark met his father, who was delighted with the boldness and success of his son in recovering the stolen wealth.

From this point the brave American lad continued his journey to the shores of the land of freedom, with his faithful comrades. And there they all now reside, the Russians thriving through the aid of the grateful American, and Clark quite satisfied with his experience of life in the Siberian and Tartar wilds.

THE END.

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